



ARCTIC ODYSSEY

A History of the Koyukuk River Gold Stampede
in Alaska's Far North



CHRIS ALLAN



As the nation's principal conservation agency, the Department of the Interior has responsibility for most of our nationally owned public lands and natural and cultural resources. This includes fostering the wisest use of our land and water resources, protecting our fish and wildlife, preserving the environmental and cultural values of our national parks and historical places, and providing for enjoyment of life through outdoor recreation.

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Chris Allan

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Front Cover: Stampeders from Beaver Falls, Pennsylvania hunting caribou in the central Brooks Range, 1898. The original caption calls them "temperate, hard-workers and faithful to the end for any kind of trip." Alaska State Library, Claude Hobart Collection (P425-6-3).

Half Title Page: The South Fork of the Koyukuk River in the Kanuti National Wildlife Refuge, 2005. Courtesy of Bill Raften, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service.

Title Page: Koyukuk stampeders gather for a mid-winter concert, January 18, 1899. University of Alaska Fairbanks Archives, Jasper N. Wyman Album (1984-115-5).

Back Cover: In late-May 1899 a stamperder stands on blocks of rotting ice along the Koyukuk River. University of Alaska Fairbanks Archives, Alaska Historical Society Photograph Collection (1976-41-109).

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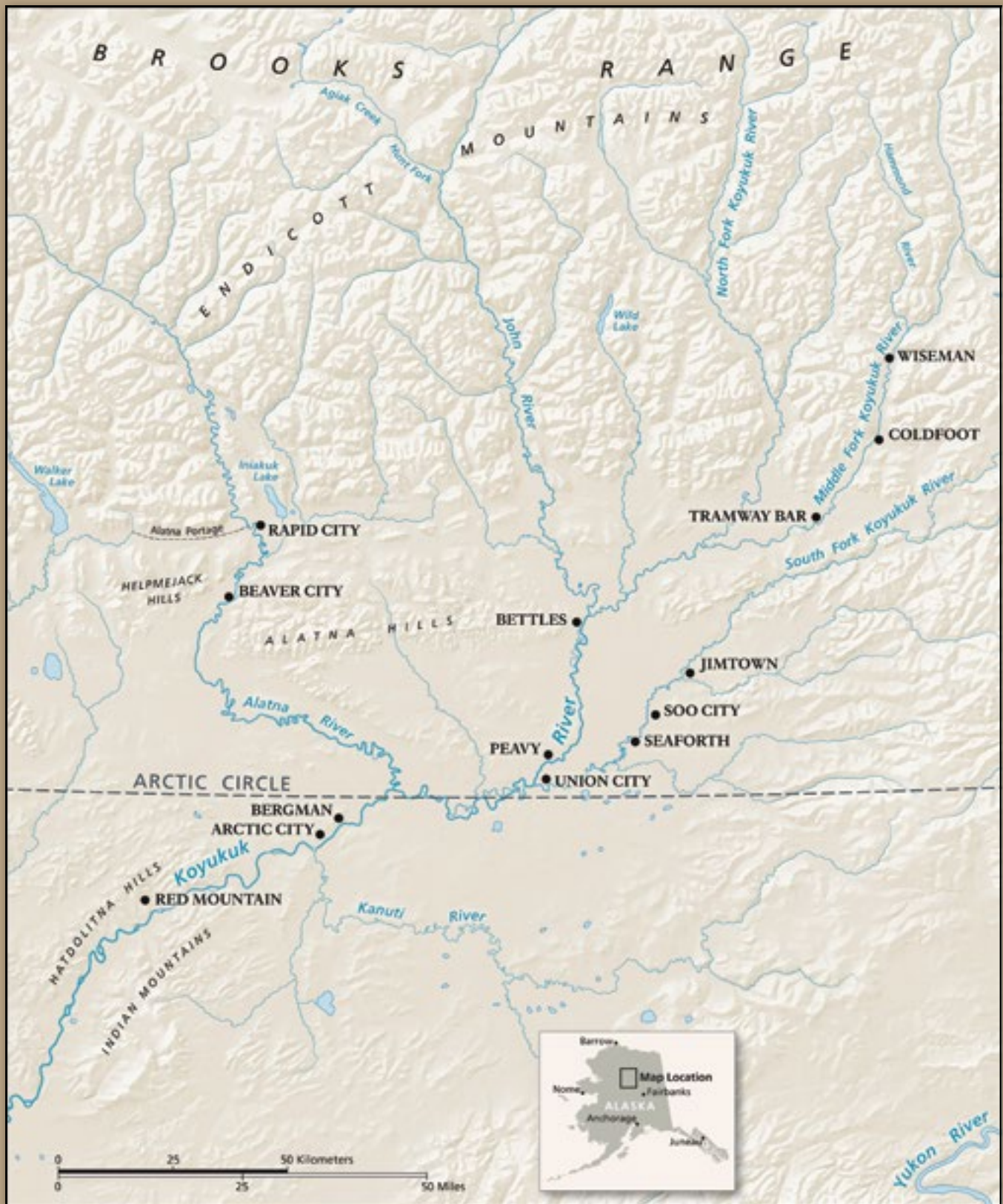
**A HISTORY OF THE KOYUKUK RIVER GOLD STAMPEDE
IN ALASKA'S FAR NORTH**

HISTORIC CONTEXT STUDY FOR:

GATES OF THE ARCTIC NATIONAL PARK & PRESERVE

**CHRIS ALLAN
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
FAIRBANKS ADMINISTRATIVE CENTER**

2016



The Koyukuk gold stampede (1898-99) produced log-cabin camps wherever steamboats stopped for the winter and trading posts that not only sold supplies but briefly emerged as thriving towns. Courtesy of Tom Patterson, National Park Service.



Winter on the Koyukuk Middle Fork
near Wiseman, 2013. Courtesy of
Heidi Schoppenhorst.

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Bear tracks pass a tuft of Northern Sweet-vetch on the Koyukuk Middle Fork, 2013. Courtesy of Matthew Harrison.

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A caribou above the Killik River valley with the Brooks Range in the background, 2016. Courtesy of Ken Hill, National Park Service.

INTRODUCTION

If you found yourself in front of the Anchorage Museum, an all-glass salute to modernity in Alaska's largest city, and on a whim decided to push past the heavy entrance doors; and if you then turned left into the archives (officially known as the Atwood Resource Center), you would have the opportunity to view one of the most stunning examples of gold rush history in the entire state—the photographic negatives of the Jasper N. Wyman Collection. At the Anchorage Museum natural light floods the research area, and after a moment or two an amiable archivist will arrive at your table carrying a storage box with reinforced metal edges that contains twenty-five or so glass plates, each measuring 4 x 5 inches or 5 x 8 inches and each protected by its own paper envelope. These are “gelatin dry plates” and in the late 1890s, when the Klondike-Alaska gold rush was in full swing, they represented a dramatic leap forward in photographic technology. Before this advance, photographers needed to prepare their own negatives on site and develop them immediately in a darkroom. Now, they could simply purchase a box of factory-made plates, take pictures far from a darkroom, and return, sometimes months later, to a camera shop for processing and prints. Or, if treated paper were available, photographers could create their own prints by placing a glass negative over the paper and exposing the pair to the rays of the sun. This was the birth of today's photography industry, and the new plates made taking pictures possible for men like Jasper Wyman in unlikely places like Alaska's Far North.

The Wyman negatives at the Anchorage Museum number over four hundred, the largest collection of his work in the country, and they arrived at the archives by a circuitous route. Three decades after the Klondike-Alaska gold rush, Wyman gave his glass plate negatives and other materials to Aurlette Ingman of Montana who expressed interest in writing a book about his gold rush experiences. She failed to find a publisher for her book, and over fifty years later Ingman's grandson donated everything to the museum in Anchorage—the collection includes Wyman's diary, letters he sent home from Alaska, Ingman's book manuscript (entitled “Gold Dust”), a catalog Wyman used to market his photographs, and, of course, the glass plate negatives. Although most of the plates survived the journey to Alaska and back, not all escaped unscathed. Some are chipped at the corners; others have cracks down the middle. An entire storage box is devoted to broken plates. And some have obvious flaws in the gelatin emulsion that held light-sensitive chemicals to the glass. Too much heat or moisture produced psychedelic flourishes in otherwise sober historical scenes and over-exposure at times yielded clouded, ghostly images. But the bulk of the plates, if you hold them up to the light, are unblemished and show obvious signs of a steady hand and an artist's eye.

Working under challenging conditions in 1898 and 1899, Wyman captured scenes from the decks of paddlewheel steamboats as they pushed north along Alaska's rivers. He took pictures outside when crippling cold engulfed men as they scraped holes in frozen earth. He even photographed the interiors



Jasper Wyman took this photograph on the Malamute Fork of the Alatna River, February 3, 1899. One can see fingerprints, wavy lines from flaws in the glass plate emulsion, and other blemishes that were hard to avoid when processing photographs north of the Arctic Circle. University of Alaska Fairbanks Archives, J.N. Wyman Photograph Album (1984-115-3).

of dark, cramped log cabins using another new technology at the time—magnesium flash-powder. In some of these images you can see the photographer himself posing with his comrades while holding the squeeze-bulb end of a cable that operated the shutter of his camera. And if you look closely, you will also notice a squiggly script near the bottom of each plate where Wyman added a catalog number, the date, and either a title or a fragment of information about the scene. In this way he documented his entire journey from the Seattle waterfront to the stormy North Pacific and beyond to mining camps north of the Arctic Circle. These are not the habits of

a hobbyist but of a photographer planning to sell his work. Even before he reached northern Alaska, Wyman sold glass plate negatives and photographic prints to fellow stampeders. In a letter to his family, he declared, “I am the only man who has made a cent yet. I made \$41.50 from just three negatives. I am still getting more orders.”¹

Known as “Jap” to his friends, Wyman was a farmer and rancher from northern Illinois who, like so many others, caught gold fever when news of the Klondike strike in northwestern Canada swept across the United States. The 28-year-old quickly packed his bags and his camera equipment

and announced his intention to try his luck as a miner. His parents, Stephan and Emma Wyman, owned farmland and raised Jasper and his nine brothers and sisters near the community of Appleton (now a ghost town) in Knox County not far from the railroad hub of Galesburg. By all accounts, their son was a charismatic fellow who loved hunting and fishing and possessed “an adventurous yet practical disposition.”² In order to have the best chance of success in fortune-hunting, he joined a group of twenty-four Illinoisans calling themselves the Galesburg-Alaska Mining & Developing Company. By the time Wyman left home, the Klondike gold fields had already assumed mythical proportions in the minds of stampedeers, but the Illinoisans would later change their plans and gamble on a lesser known prospect—the Koyukuk River in Alaska’s Far North. And Wyman was not the only photographer to seek gold in Koyukuk country. There were others including Claude Hobart who lived in the same mining camps as Wyman and whose photographs can be distinguished by their ragged edges and less formal esthetic. However, Wyman’s images are greater in number and, when combined with his diary and letters, they offer by far the most complete single chronicle of the Koyukuk River gold stampede.

Wyman’s photographs and other historical documents related to the Koyukuk River stampede capture a moment in time when many Americans and people from around the world contracted what the newspapers called Klondicitis. This curious malady compelled thousands to abandon their loved ones and everyday lives to seek out a distant and alien corner of the continent. To those who stayed home it seemed like a form of madness, and without a doubt the chances of striking it rich were exceedingly poor. Even so, many had good reason to make a desperate bid for

gold. When news arrived of the Klondike strike, the United States was still struggling to recover from an economic collapse triggered by the so-called Panic of 1893. The effects of this event lingered for years, and it seems likely the Wyman farm and others in the vicinity would have suffered. At the time, Americans expressed a wide range of reasons for looking north—some hoped to escape financial doldrums; others were thrilled by the chance for adventure; and still more, whether rich or poor, could not resist the idea of gold nuggets free for the taking. For Jasper Wyman and his friend Norman Aldrich, an architect from Galesburg, the lure of adventure seems to have been at least as strong as the promise of easy wealth.³

The canon of Klondike-Alaska gold rush literature is broad and gold mining tales continue to sell well in gift shops and bookstores. Yet little has been published on the mining history of the Koyukuk River, and this neglected chapter in Alaska’s history deserves to be better understood. In *Arctic Citadel: A History of Exploration in the Brooks Range Region of Northern Alaska* (2012) I mentioned the Koyukuk stampede briefly because the event relates to the efforts of the U.S. Geological Survey to study mining prospects in northern Alaska. Other authors offer descriptions of the stampede, including William Brown in *History of the Central Brooks Range: Gaunt Beauty, Tenuous Life* (2007) and William Hunt in a study of mining in Alaska’s national parks called *Golden Places: The History of Alaska-Yukon Mining* (1990).⁴ In addition, Terrence Cole wrote “Early Explorers and Prospectors on the Koyukuk” for Alaska Geographic’s *Up the Koyukuk* (1983). These accounts are useful, but limited in length and depth, and a more substantial treatment can be found in *Journey to the Koyukuk: The Photos of J.N. Wyman* (1988), which blends Wyman’s photographs with paraphrased



Koyukuk River residents in a tent of willow saplings and canvas with a Yukon stove for heat, 1899. University of Alaska Fairbanks Archives, Alaska Historical Society Photograph Collection (1976-41-101).

sections of his gold rush diary. This volume has done much to increase appreciation of Wyman's photography, and it serves as a fine introduction, though readers should be aware that it focuses exclusively on the activities of the Galesburg-Alaska Mining & Developing Company. As you will see, the story is much grander than this.

One curious symptom of gold fever is that the more remote the gold or improbable the location, the more attractive it appears to would-be stampedeers. And if Jasper

Wyman and his compatriots were seeking a distant and exotic location, they could do no better than the Koyukuk River. Tracing the length of the Koyukuk on a map from its confluence with the Yukon to its birthplace among the peaks and valleys of the Brooks Range is no mean feat. The Koyukuk twists and turns through more than 500 miles of northern Alaska and then, above the Arctic Circle, it branches like the antlers of a caribou into several major rivers—the Alatna, the John, and the Koyukuk's North, Middle,

and South Forks.⁵ Together this network of waterways drains 35,000 square miles of wildlands between the Continental Divide (also called the Arctic Divide) and where the Koyukuk pours into the Yukon River. This is a land of seasonal extremes where brief, bright summers compete with frigid winters, stubborn darkness, and permanently frozen ground. Immense forests of birch, aspen and spruce grow along the river's banks, and in the central Brooks Range the northern taiga gives way to treeless tundra and stony mountain peaks. Grizzly bears, black bears, wolves, moose, and caribou thrive, and in summer the region teems with migrating birds. For human beings, the Koyukuk has long served as a source of food and as a watery highway that makes travel possible through a challenging landscape.

Long before outsiders arrived in the Koyukuk region seeking gold, Alaska's Native people took advantage of the rivers, streams, and millions of acres of land to sustain themselves over generations. In most books about the gold rush era, indigenous people appear seldom and are usually portrayed as more or less passive observers. To reverse this trend, it is important to acknowledge that the hunt for gold on the Koyukuk and elsewhere took place in the homelands of Alaska's original inhabitants, and this study endeavors, where possible, to highlight the participation of Koyukon Athabascan Indians and neighboring groups in the historical action. Before the arrival of fur traders, missionaries, and gold-seekers, the Koyukon people lived exclusively from the land, harvesting fish and wild game and trading with Eskimo people and other Athabascan groups living on the periphery of their territory. Historically much of the Koyukuk region was a zone of cultural mixing where Yupik Eskimos from Norton Sound and the lower Yukon River and Inupiaq Eskimos from Kotzebue Sound, the Kobuk and

Selawik Rivers, and the vast Brooks Range routinely arrived on hunting and trading expeditions. In spite of occasional violent clashes, these groups participated in trade fairs at locations along the Koyukuk (at the present-day site of Alatna, for example), and in many cases Koyukon people intermarried with their neighbors.⁶

Beginning in the 1830s, merchants under the direction of the Russian-American Company established outposts on the Yukon River and drew the Koyukon Athabascans into their fur harvesting empire. The Russian traders introduced goods Alaska's indigenous people valued like metal tools, wool and cotton cloth, tea and tobacco, trade beads, and firearms. The foreigners also brought pathogens like smallpox and influenza that killed many, and epidemic disease remained a persistent threat.⁷ During the Russian period, many Koyukon people lived in a string of villages on the Koyukuk and the Yukon River. But frequently families were on the move, following seasonal routes between hunting and fishing camps and launching expeditions to trade with other Alaska Native groups. In the 1870s and 1880s, American fur traders replaced their Russian counterparts and began buying wolf, lynx, fox, marten, mink, and beaver in large numbers from local trappers. Quick to adapt to new opportunities, the Koyukon also collected gold during this period, and newspapers reported that "Indians who occasionally come to the mouth of the [Koyukuk] river to trade always have gold nuggets."⁸

When thousands of stampeders raced to claim their share of the Klondike, reports already circulated that the Canadian gold fields were "all filled up" and the gold-seekers faced a choice: work for wages at someone else's Klondike mine or search for gold on the American side of the international boundary. Those who chose the Koyukuk River came from as far away as Illinois, Michigan, and



The wild flower *Arnica Angustifolia* in Kanuti National Wildlife Refuge, 2005. Courtesy of Joanna Fox, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service.

New York, and most were woefully unprepared for life above the Arctic Circle. Many suffered from homesickness and others from poor nutrition, anxiety, and sometimes fatal accidents. During the winter of 1898-1899, an ad hoc commonwealth formed on the upper Koyukuk made up of steamboat captains, seasoned miners, know-nothing 'cheechakos,' and the merchants who set up shop to sell picks and shovels and beans and bacon. The area's indigenous residents, the people who called this place home, must have watched with alarm as a mob of nearly two thousand

outsiders arrived unexpectedly. Nonetheless, they traded with stampedeers, invited them on hunting excursions, and lived as neighbors. Soon rough-and-tumble mining camps took shape on the upper branches of the Koyukuk River system with names like Union City, Seaforth, Soo City, Beaver City, Rapid City, and Jimtown. The purpose of this study is to identify the origins of this extraordinary burst of human activity and to tell the story of the Koyukuk River stampedeers as they struggled through a long, dark winter in one of Alaska's most isolated gold rush hinterlands.

ENDNOTES

¹ Jasper N. Wyman, letter to his family in Illinois, June 26, 1898, Anchorage Museum, Wyman Collection.

² Aurlette Ingman, "Gold Dust," (1938), 13, manuscript based on Jasper N. Wyman's diary, Anchorage Museum, Wyman Collection.

³ For a detailed explanation of the Panic of 1893 see, Charles P. Kindleberger and Robert Z. Aliber, *Manias, Panics and Crashes: A History of Financial Crises* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2001 [1978]).

⁴ William Brown's research for his book began with an impressive two-volume historic resources study for Gates of the Arctic National Park & Preserve entitled *Gaunt Beauty, Tenuous Life* (1988).

⁵ The Koyukuk River between the Yukon River and the Arctic Circle measures roughly 500 miles and its longest northern tributary, the Alatna River, is 145 miles long. River measurements from Donald J. Orth, *Dictionary of Alaska Place Names* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1967).

⁶ Annette M. Clark, "Koyukon," in *Handbook of North American Indians: Subarctic*, ed. June Helm (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1981), 582-601.

⁷ Population estimates for Koyukon Athabascans rise and fall as diseases spread through the region beginning in the late 1830s. Russian and American sources suggest that the number of Koyukon Athabascans was roughly one thousand between 1843 and 1880 and that the number later dropped into the low hundreds most likely due of the arrival of gold-seekers and their communicable diseases. See, Clark, "Koyukon," 585, and Clark, *Koyukuk River Culture* (Ottawa: National Museums of Canada, 1974), 106-109.

⁸ "The Klondike Spreading," *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, December 8, 1897, 4.



A fishing net and cleaning table
along the Koyukuk River, 2006.
Courtesy of Steve Hillebrand, U.S.
Fish & Wildlife Service.

Chapter 1: Grubstake Diggings—The Koyukuk Before the Gold Rush

There have been during the last decade many thousand men in the Yukon country prospecting and mining . . . Hundreds have gone away poor in pocket and broken in health by the rigors of the climate, hardships, and privations.

—Pacific Rural Press, December 25, 1897

The Koyukuk River has a history as a gold mining region that predates the Klondike-Alaska gold rush by more than a decade. In the 1870s and 1880s, a handful of American fur traders and prospectors took an interest in the Koyukuk River and entered the world of the Koyukon Athabascans who had already participated in the fur trading economy established by Russians in the early 1800s. Like the Russians, the Americans were eager to acquire furs, but they were also seeking mineral wealth. The frontiersmen who wanted to test the Koyukuk's money-making potential traveled north over the snow while pulling heavy sleds and others brought the first paddlewheel steamboat up the sinuous length of the river in summer. They built log cabins, traded with the indigenous residents, and discovered gold in gravel bars that would later become rich producers. Even though the trail was arduous and the profits sporadic—and bloodshed complicated relations between the Koyukon and the gold-seekers—their enthusiasm for the Koyukuk River set the stage for a moment when stampeders would arrive in droves.

In the decades after the 1867 purchase of Alaska from Russia, the Alaska Commercial Company established a string of trading posts

along the Yukon River to pull profits from America's newest territory. The company built a headquarters at the former Russian post of St. Michael located on Norton Sound about forty miles from the mouth of the Yukon River, and their warehouses bulged with many thousands of dollars' worth of furs obtained from Alaska Native hunters and trappers from both the coast and the interior. Three of the most famous of these early Yukon River fur traders were Jack McQuesten, Al Mayo and Arthur Harper who all arrived in Alaska in 1873 and quickly established themselves as brokers in the fur business from the northwestern corner of Canada to the lower Yukon River at the village of Nulato near the mouth of the Koyukuk. All three men also married Alaska Native women, which helped them to establish deep roots in the indigenous communities of the region. Although trading in fur provided reliable incomes, they were preoccupied by something that fired their imaginations and gave them no rest—the pursuit of gold. Gold had drawn them northward, and once they established trading stations on the Yukon River they frequently left their families and fur-trading obligations to pan along the rivers and creeks. Although they never struck



A Tanana Athabascan woman on the Yukon River with a brace of snowshoe hares, her flintlock rifle, and powder horn, 1885. Alaska State Library, Wickersham State Historic Site (P277-17-11).



Yukon River fur traders and boatmen strike a pose on the old Russian cannons at St. Michael, 1885. Alaska State Library, Wickersham State Historic Site (P277-17-3).

rich deposits, they did find what prospectors called “colors,” the telltale specks of yellow in the bottom of their prospecting pans that hinted at buried wealth. The problem was not finding gold—it seemed to be almost everywhere—but rather facing the reality that it cost more to recover than the gold was worth. In his account of those days Jack McQuesten repeated a familiar refrain, “I found colors but I did not find anything that would pay to work.”¹

The pursuit of gold along the Yukon River in Alaska and northwestern Canada remained tentative until the 1880s when a series of events triggered keen interest in the Far North’s promise. First, in 1880, a prospector named George Holt managed, with the help of U.S. Marines and a Gatling machine gun, to negotiate an agreement with the Tlingit Indians to allow whites over the Chilkoot Pass. This opening in the mountains allowed access from southeast Alaska to

the headwaters of the Yukon River.² In the same year, two prospectors named Joseph Juneau and Richard Harris discovered veins of gold in Gastineau Channel and founded the city of Juneau where the Treadwell Mine would soon employ over two thousand people and become the largest hard-rock gold mine in the world. Almost overnight Alaska became famous for its gold, and increasing numbers of prospectors used Chilkoot Pass to penetrate Canadian territory in search of fortunes. Then, in 1886, gold was discovered on the Fortymile River near the U.S.-Canadian border and men rushed in to establish the first major gold camp in the interior.³ Jack McQuesten, Al Mayo, and Arthur Harper were on hand to establish a trading post; the Anglican Church built a mission school; and the North West Mounted Police arrived to maintain law and order.⁴ For the next ten years, prospectors would number in the hundreds, more discoveries would be made, and





gold mining on the Yukon would rival fur trading as the dominant economic engine.

These early Yukon River gold-hunters lived a peripatetic existence, frequently moving from one prospect to the next and maintaining a constant state of readiness in case news of a “sure thing” arrived. Israel Russell, part of a U.S. Coast and Geodetic Survey expedition to the Yukon River in 1889, described the men he encountered at the Fortymile River:

The miners are a rough, hardy race, made up, it would seem, of representatives of nearly every nation on earth. Some are typical frontiersmen, dressed in buckskin, who are never at home except on the outskirts of civilization. Others were of doubtful character and it is said

are seldom known by their rightful names. The remote gulches of the Yukon country seem to offer safe asylums for men who are ‘wanted’ in other districts.⁵

Though they may have looked like a rogue’s gallery, the prospectors were generally peaceful and there were reasons for their rough appearance—mining was no life of luxury and steamboats carrying new clothes to replace their worn-out duds were infrequent. Also, as resourceful as they were, few had enough money to purchase supplies for more than a few months. Their cash often ran out, and the only sure way to continue the quest for gold was to obtain a grubstake from a willing fur trader like Jack McQuesten who was famous for his generosity when it came to needy prospectors. Another option

Early gold miners gather at the mining camp of Fortymile on the upper Yukon River, 1893. Alaska State Library, Wickersham State Historic Site (P277-1-131).

Preceding page: The explorer and U.S. Army lieutenant Henry T. Allen after completing his transect of Alaska from the Copper River to the Koyukuk River, 1885. University of Alaska Anchorage, Fred Wildon Fickett Papers (HMC-108, series 8b-6).

SIDENOTE 1:

GRUBSTAKING AND THE PLACER MINER

There is no abatement of the Klondyke fever in Seattle, and it appears to be extending all over the Northwest. Hundreds are being liberally grubstaked and experienced miners are in active demand. From \$500 to \$600 is given them and they share half their finds.

—All About the Klondyke Gold Mines, 1897

Long before the Klondike-Alaska gold rush, most prospectors who wanted to search for gold along the Yukon River had a problem—they lacked the cash for travel and supplies. The solution was grubstaking. The origin of the term *grubstake* is obscure, but it likely emerged during the California gold rush of the 1840s as a pairing of *grub* (meaning food) and *stake*, suggesting both a wager and a loan. For the average prospector, this was his only hope of making a strike. And for storeowners or fur traders, grubstaking others was a convenient way to profit from gold mining without getting their hands dirty.

Under this informal system, a prospector explored virgin territory or followed rumors of gold discoveries, and if he struck gold he would share half with his benefactor. If he came up empty, he might ask to be grubstaked for several years in a row. In fact, traders like Jack McQuesten and Gordon Bettles at times gave out \$100,000 or more in the hope that miners would finally discover gold and “open up” a new mining district. When news of the Klondike discovery broke, thousands of people yearned to reach the gold fields and needed to find \$500 or more to pay for passage northward and to purchase an *outfit*—that is, enough food, clothing, and equipment to survive the winter and begin the search for gold.

WANTED—PARTNER; I WOULD LIKE
to meet some one who is willing to grub-
stake to Alaska gold fields an honest
man; one who will guarantee you a
square deal, and give gilt-edge reference
as to honesty and integrity; am a rustler
and will give half. Address A., box 51,
Herald. 30

Advertisement for
a “grubstake” to
the Klondike. *Los*
Angeles Herald,
November 30, 1897.

was to return south to the Treadwell Mine where a man could work for wages until he had enough to buy supplies for another year of searching. In fact, the only early prospector who did not require grubstaking was Edward Schieffelin, the discoverer of silver at what became Tombstone, Arizona. He and his small band of prospectors arrived in 1882 with everything they would need, but after one short, frustrating summer Schieffelin was ready to leave. He would later write, “The country will never amount to anything. The climate will not permit of it . . . I believe the land is frozen eternally.”⁶

The tools and techniques prospectors used in those days were exceedingly primitive. A shovel, pick, and pan were essential, and everything had to be carried on a man’s back or hauled by pack dogs or with a poling boat on a river. The frozen ground that so vexed Schieffelin thwarted all the early prospectors and most were limited to working only the upper layer of gold-bearing material where permafrost was less of a problem. After discovering signs of gold on a gravel bar or section of creek, the prospector might assemble a wooden sluicing device called a “rocker” or “cradle,” so called because it resembled a child’s cradle. A miner with a rocker could collect many times more gold than with only a prospecting pan.⁷ If flowing water were in ample supply, he could also build long sluice boxes. Like rockers, these wooden troughs were equipped with shallow fences called riffles that used gravity and the motion of water to capture particles of gold. Many prospectors also carried flasks of mercury which they sprinkled into their sluices because of the liquid metal’s remarkable ability to bond chemically with gold. The mercury made collecting the tiniest particles of gold much easier.

Even so, the problem of subterranean ice could not be avoided for long because the richest concentrations of gold lay under-

ground in a layer just above bedrock called a “paystreak.” Soon the miners developed a uniquely northern solution. The technique they used was called “burning down” and it was a modified version of drift mining used in the California gold rush of the 1840s. In order to penetrate the icy gravel, miners sank shafts down to the gold-bearing strata by setting bonfires that melted roughly one foot of gravel in a day. Then, using a bucket and windlass system, they removed the mud and gravel and set the gravel aside to be processed in the spring. Once they reached bedrock, the miners then tunneled horizontally to collect the most valuable gravel (this lateral section of tunnel was called a “drift”). This work was usually done in winter because the cold temperatures ensured that ground water would not flow into the holes and that the walls of the shaft would not melt and collapse. Thawing with wood fires was dirty, dangerous, and time-consuming, but it was the only way to get at the gold hidden deep in the earth.⁸

The first prospectors to take an interest in the Koyukuk River arrived in the Alaskan interior by an unconventional route. They were following in the footsteps of Lieutenant Henry T. Allen of the U.S. Army and two other soldiers who volunteered to attempt a wildly ambitious 1,500-mile transect of Alaska. Lt. Allen’s group set out in 1885 to map the length of the Copper River beginning at the Gulf of Alaska and then continued northward to the Yukon River and beyond.⁹ Early in this expedition, Allen encountered two prospectors—John Bremner and Pete Johnson—who asked to accompany him. Once the group reached the Yukon River, the two miners elected to remain at a trading post called Nuklukyet near the mouth of the Tanana River while Allen, accompanied by Private Fred Fickett and several Koyukuk Athabaskan packers, pressed on along an overland



Fort Mercier, or "Nuklukayet", 14 miles below the mouth of^N
the Tanana river on the right bank down stream. 1884.

Drawing in crayon of the Yukon River trading post of Nuklukyet, 1884. The post was also known as Fort Mercier after the fur trader François Mercier. University of Alaska Fairbanks, Dr. Willis E. Everette Collection. (1976-91-Album).

trail that led to the Kanuti River and then the Koyukuk near the Arctic Circle. From here Allen pushed farther north to the Alatna River and the John River before deciding to turn back because of dwindling food supplies.¹⁰

Meanwhile, the two prospectors spent the winter of 1886 listening to stories of Koyukuk gold shared by Al Mayo and the other fur traders at Nuklukyet. They also befriended one of the post's fourteen winter residents, a prospector named James Bender who had come over the Chilkoot Pass to

get into the country before descending the Yukon River looking for mining opportunities. Bender, like so many Yukon pioneers, had moved west from his home (in this case, Indiana) to one gold mining district after another until he reached Alaska.¹¹ In the spring, when snow was still on the ground and the rivers were frozen, the three men joined forces. They purchased an outfit of food and tools at the trading post and set out overland, each one pulling a heavy sled using a technique called "necking" with a towing strap



A Koyukon Athabascan shaman named Red Shirt poses on a Russian cannon at St. Michael, 1885. Alaska State Library, Wickersham State Historic Site (P277-17-12).

SIDENOTE 2:

THE SHALLOW AND THE DEEP OF PLACER GOLD MINING

Frozen gravel will successfully resist all attacks of pick and shovel, and its extreme toughness renders even drilling and blasting very tedious and ineffective, so the miner thaws the ground before attempting to dig it.

—Placer Mining: A Handbook, 1897

Unlike hardrock mining, which exploits veins of metal in solid rock, placer mining is the practice of separating heavily eroded minerals from sand and gravel—the word *placer* comes from Spanish and Catalan meaning a shoal or sand bar. Prospectors rushing to the Far North in 1898 hoped that they would find what was called “sunburnt gold” at or near the surface, and they envisioned gold nuggets simply lying in plain view. A lucky few did find rich surface deposits or exposed bedrock where nuggets were lodged in rocky cracks, but most placer mining involved a lot of digging—and not only digging, but thawing.

Unlike more southerly gold fields, much of the ground in the Klondike and Alaskan interior was frozen all year long. And unless miners were content to work surface deposits, they needed to dig many feet down to reach streaks of gold where, over the eons, gravity has delivered them just above bedrock. Penetrating permafrost with hand tools was impossible, so they developed a technique called “burning down” that involved building bonfires daily to thaw the ground and then removing the gravel with a winch and bucket. Burn, dig, dump. Burn, dig, dump. That was the life of the placer gold miner in the Koyukuk and elsewhere.



Drawings to show process of “burning down” through frozen ground. San Francisco Call, July 28, 1897.

around the head or shoulders. After arriving at the Koyukuk River, they pushed northward to the mouth of the John River before the thaw. When break-up finally arrived, they explored gravel bars exposed by the meandering river and annual flooding. After building rockers, they were able to gather enough gold for a grubstake, but when their food supplies gave out the three men were compelled to return to the Yukon River to spend the winter at Nuklukyet trading post.¹²

According to James Bender, the three prospectors were soon planning the next year's efforts and hired Koyukon men to "haul our stuff to the head of Old Man's River [Kanut River] in the wintertime when they were hunting." Caching supplies in the vicinity would enable the prospectors to carry less and work longer on the Koyukuk the following summer. News of their modest success convinced others to make the journey, and by spring fourteen Koyukon packers were employed and at least a dozen white prospectors began necking their outfits northward, including Johnny Folger, Henry Davis, Earnest Chapman, John Hughes, Chris Sonnikson, Frank Dinsmore, Hank Wright, and Matt Hall. Two brothers, John Minook and Pitka Pavaloff, both born of a Russian father and Koyukon mother, also joined this expedition and would play a critical role in the unfolding events.¹³ When the group reached the John River, they stopped to camp and whipsaw lumber to build a river boat for ascending this Koyukuk tributary. As Bender recalled, he was so exhausted from hauling his supplies that the first thing he did was declare "I have pulled this far enough" and threw his sled onto the campfire. His comrades followed suit, and soon all they had left of the sleds were ashes and a few iron fittings.¹⁴

What happened next was a disturbing episode in the history of the Koyukuk. According to multiple accounts, John Bremner

soon told Pete Johnson that he wanted to strike out on his own to do more extensive prospecting, so Johnson helped his partner build a boat to travel downriver along the Koyukuk. The 54-year-old prospector (he was known as "old John" by his comrades) had a week's worth of food and two firearms—an old shot gun and a rifle. Around noon on his first day of travel, Bremner stopped at a Koyukon village near the mouth of the Hogatza River and shared a meal of fried duck and tea with a local shaman and his teenage nephew. But soon this cordial atmosphere changed, as James Bender later explained:

[Bremner] had set his gun up against the bank to catch another duck and the old man gave the boy half the duck and a cup of tea. After they were through eating, he took the frying pan and little tea-pot and stepped down a couple of benches to put them in the boat. While he was putting them in the boat, the Indian picked up the gun and shot him. The Indian said he jumped right over the boat into the river when shot.

In a slightly different version, both Koyukon men were involved in the murder:

When he got within a few feet of the boat, the old medicine man told the young Indian to shoot John and they would have his boat, gun and grub and no one would ever know what became of the old man as the white men were few and the Indians were many in number. The young Indian did as he was told, through fear of the medicine man, and shot

poor old John twice but didn't kill him. Then the old medicine man took the gun and shot him three more times before he was dead. They sank his body in the river and went on their way with the boat and supplies.¹⁵

After several days, when Bremner failed to rejoin his comrades, Pete Johnson built yet another boat and went searching. An account by a Koyukon-Russian woman named Erinia Pavaloff Cherosky describes her traveling with her husband and her two brothers, Pitka and John Minook, who were both experienced gold prospectors. The family group encountered Bremner in the days before his death and then followed a day or two behind him as they moved downriver. As she explained, "All the way down . . . my brothers asked the Indians at their camps wherever we stopped if they had seen a white man in a boat going down. They all said they had." When these reports stopped, they grew suspicious and sent some young men to search upstream tributaries, but to no avail. By the time they reached the mouth of the Koyukuk and caught a steamboat for Nuklukyet, the family knew that not only was Bremner missing but that he had been murdered.¹⁶

The news reached the trading post on July 10, 1888, and when the men there convened a miners' meeting, the verdict was unanimous: they would seek revenge for the killing. Twenty-two prospectors volunteered to find the murderers, and they commandeered the steamer *Explorer* that belonged to a fur trader at the settlement of Russian Mission. With John Minook acting as interpreter, the vigilante gang headed up the Koyukuk with a full head of steam. Along the way they found Bremner's boat ("all torn to pieces") as well as guns and tools with his name on them. And when they arrived at the

main village where eighty Koyukon Athabascans were living, the sight of the *Explorer* alarmed the residents who had never before seen a steamboat. One member of the posse, Henry Davis, described their arrival and the ensuing action:

We saw smoke two bends upstream and all hands on the front deck got ready to jump when the boat hit the bank. Others jumped and spread out around the Indian camp. Their dogs were barking and jumping, and the Indians ran into the tents, scared stiff. Only one Indian moved for his gun and [Johnny] Folger hit him over the head with the barrel of his Buffalo Gun. We all got together in a bunch, and Manook [John Minook] asked the Chief for the Indian who killed the white man prospector. Then the Indian who Folger had hit stood out bold and said, 'I killed the white man.'¹⁷

The vigilantes took the shaman, his wife, and the young man onboard the steamer. They also smashed the prisoners' rifles over the ship's woodpile and threw the pieces into the river. After a short period of downriver travel, they released the shaman's wife and spent the rest of the day returning to the Yukon River where they held an improvised trial. When asked why he killed Bremner, the young Koyukon man said he wanted his gun, blanket, and stash of tobacco, and when he was informed he would be hanged for the crime, he is reported to have said that "he wished he could kill more whites as they were no good anyway."¹⁸ Next the posse tried the shaman but could not connect him directly to the crime, and when only seven of the twenty-two jurors voted for hanging, the

old man was spared. That same day, on an island across from the Koyukuk River mouth, they carried out the sentence and left the body hanging in plain view “as an example to the other Indians so that they would not ever kill another prospector.”¹⁹ Among the prospectors who continued the search for gold in Koyukuk country, the river where John Bremner was last seen alive was dubbed Old John’s River—today it is known simply as the John River.²⁰

In the years after Bremner’s death and the extra-legal execution, only a handful of prospectors explored the creeks of the upper Koyukuk drainage. The Koyukuk remained difficult to reach and to supply and it may well have faded entirely as a mining district if not for the efforts of the Koyukuk’s most persistent advocate, Gordon C. Bettles. Born in Detroit, Michigan in 1859, Bettles had extensive life experience before he reached Alaska at the age of twenty-seven. He had been a typesetter for the *Detroit Free Press*, a miner in Colorado, and a prospector and cowboy in Montana, Idaho, and Washington. Like many early Alaskan prospectors, Bettles found work at the Treadwell Mine in Juneau before crossing Chilkoot Pass en route to the Fortymile diggings in 1888. Eventually Bettles found himself at the Nuklukyet trading station just in time to learn of John Bremner’s death and to join the posse that went in pursuit of the perpetrator.²¹

By 1891 Bettles had established himself as a successful fur trader with stations at Nuklukyet and Nulato, and he was hatching plans to open a “bean shop” (a term among miners for a trading and supply post) on the Koyukuk River. But, for the time being this idea would have to wait because the tiny Yukon steamboat bringing his load of supplies that year hit a rock and sank. This was not uncommon, and Bettles noted, “When that happened, every miner was in a bad



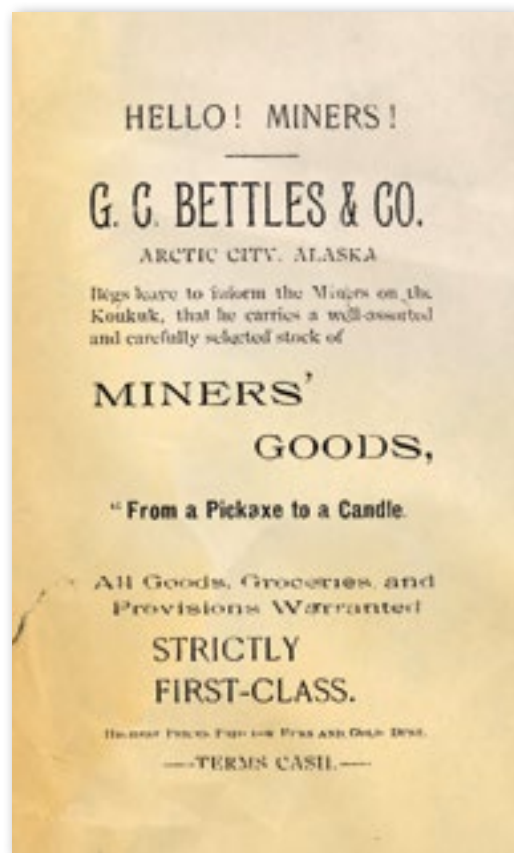
way and had to eat off the country or starve to death.”²² A year later he married Sophie Kokrine, the half-Koyukon daughter of a Yukon River trader from Russia named Gregory Kokrine.²³ Because of his success as a fur trader, Bettles was also able to begin grubstaking prospectors. Like Jack McQuesten, Bettles was well liked by miners because he was quick to offer credit even when a miner was down on his luck, and he soon bankrolled

The Yukon River fur trader and prospector Gordon C. Bettles, ca. 1890. Courtesy of Candy Waugaman.

Advertisement for Gordon Bettles' new "bean shop" at Arctic City on the upper Koyukuk River. *Yukon Press*, May 1, 1894.

at least a dozen men he already knew and trusted who were headed to the Koyukuk. In addition, a steamboat captain named Billie Moore entered Koyukuk country in 1892 with a vessel called *Cora* and a small barge with supplies. About three hundred miles up the river, he built a log cabin and a store and began trading for furs with the local Koyukon Athabascans. This business venture was almost cut short when the local trappers accused Moore of cheating them by paying less for furs than they could get at Nulato. After mutual threats and the brandishing of guns, the issue was resolved when Moore raised the prices he was willing to pay and reminded the men of what had happened to John Bremner's murderer four years earlier.²⁴

Within a year Bettles and Moore formed a business partnership and decided to expand their enterprise by purchasing the *Cora* from its owner in St. Michael and making it the first steam-powered vessel to regularly navigate the Koyukuk River. In addition, they hired a crew to build a trading post about four hundred miles up the Koyukuk near the mouth of the Kanuti River. Because of its proximity to the Arctic Circle they would call it Arctic City. The two men brought twenty tons of supplies from San Francisco for the newly formed firm G.C. Bettles & Company, and Bettles was at last able to open his "bean shop" and become the only trader and outfitter for hundreds of miles around.²⁵ The company's first newspaper advertisement declared, "Hello! Miners! G.C. Bettles & Company begs leave to inform the miners on the Koukuk [sic], that he carries a well assorted and carefully selected stock of Miners' Goods from a pickaxe to a candle." As he later explained, the business strategy was to help miners overcome the exceedingly long supply lines to the upper Koyukuk: "The idea of making this trip up the Koyukuk with supplies was to have supplies nearer the source



of the gold, as most of the prospector's time was spent moving his supplies up as far as the bars, and they were fairly well worked out. I decided to take a chance."²⁶

The fall of 1893 was an exciting time for Gordon Bettles. He left his Yukon River posts under the direction of Al Mayo and turned over to the Alaska Commercial Company his largest load of furs yet—the pelts of 15,000 marten, 6,000 fox (including 200 silver), 3,000 lynx, 1,200 beaver, 1,200 bears, and 500 tanned moose skins. This windfall would help to finance his Koyukuk ventures, and he moved in at Arctic City where he would spend the rest of the season orchestrating a systematic hunt for the motherlode of Koyukuk gold.²⁷ As Bettles explained in a memoir,

There were fifteen men on the river at this time, and only three of them had taken out enough to pay for their outfits. There was only one of two things to do—either find more money, or get out of the country, so I put it up to the bunch to take a good outfit and start for upriver to find the source of the gold as I couldn't afford to carry them on the bars any longer [where the gold was spotty].²⁸

The prospectors built cabins at Arctic City, Bettles grubstaked the ones who needed it, and they all fanned out along a half-dozen Koyukuk tributaries. And soon their efforts began to pay. John Hughes found gold in what became known as Hughes Bar, and one hundred and fifty miles north of Arctic City, Ernest Chapman and Johnny Folger found coarse gold on the Koyukuk Middle Fork at a place they called Tramway Bar after the crude bucket and wooden rail system (or tramway) they installed to carry gravel to the creek. The two men staked claims and used a rocker at the creek's edge to recover \$400 each in three weeks. Soon Bettles and Moore had purchased half of the Tramway Bar claim for \$2000 and the prospectors were abuzz with the promise of a bonanza.²⁹ As winter set in, Bettles hired men to cut the *Cora* in half and to whipsaw lumber to extend the length of the vessel by twenty feet. When the modification was complete Bettles would rename the boat *Koyukuk* (though at the time he spelled the name *Koukuk*). The other men set about hunting moose, caribou, and snowshoe hares and spent long, cold winter evenings playing cards when the thermometer outside registered as low as seventy-two degrees below zero. Captain Moore reported they were all in good health, the prospectors baked pies and cakes for the holidays, and "Christmas

and New Year's passed without having any trouble, as there were no intoxicating liquors at the feasts."³⁰

These peaceful times, however, would not last. When spring arrived, warmer temperatures melted the winter's heavy snowfall and steady rains added to the Koyukuk's volume during break-up. The river soon overflowed its banks and ran inside the men's cabins and the store building at Arctic City. Even so, Bettles felt fortunate because he was able to free the newly lengthened and newly christened *Koyukuk* from the ice and evacuate Arctic City by maneuvering the boat up to each building to take people and goods aboard. He described the fact that the boat was completed on time as "the luckiest thing that ever happened to us."³¹ He then sailed downriver to a patch of high ground and camped for several days to dry out. While Captain Moore and a handful of men went back up the Koyukuk in small boats to wait for the water to subside, Bettles navigated toward the Yukon River only to find that with each mile that passed the floodwaters grew deeper. In fact, to replenish the steamboat's fuel supply Bettles turned the vessel into the forest where the water was still fifteen feet deep a quarter of a mile from the main river channel. There his crewmen cut the tops of trees to feed the engine. As his steamboat entered the Yukon and moved upriver toward Nuklukyet, Bettles was astonished at the extent of the flooding. Instead of returning to the site of Arctic City, he decided to build a store and a warehouse at the present-day site of Tanana.³²

Meanwhile, Moore was still in Koyukuk country trying to develop the G.C. Bettles & Company holdings at Tramway Bar where he was expending considerable money and effort to construct a long ditch to bring water from a nearby lake to his sluice boxes. Because much of the ground along the course of the ditch was frozen, Moore and his men used

a makeshift pump to inundate the icy gravel so that it would thaw faster. But when he finally started mining, the rich ground quickly ran out, or as Moore put it, “the paystreak pinched down as we went into the [Tramway] Bar.”³³ As a result, Moore decided to abandon the claim and his partnership with Bettles. Bettles’ vision of developing the Koyukuk was further undermined by two new stampedes up the Yukon River at Rampart and Birch Creek. The Rampart discovery was made by John Minook, the same Russian-Koyukon man who acted as translator during the search for John Bremner and who participated in early Koyukuk prospecting trips. The discovery at Birch Creek was even bigger, and a log cabin metropolis called Circle City sprang up along the banks of the Yukon River banks where Jack McQuesten established that boomtown’s first store under the aegis of the Alaska Commercial Company.³⁴

Still, Gordon Bettles was not discouraged—he continued to run trading posts at Nulato, Nuklukyet and Tanana, and most of the men who left for Rampart and Birch Creek bought their outfits from him before they left. The Koyukuk gold fields had proven problematic due to their remote, northern location and the risk of flooding, but Bettles’ greatest frustration was that the river’s gravel bars only offered what the miners called “grubstake diggings”—enough gold to buy supplies for the following year but not enough to get rich. However, Bettles was far from idle. In 1894 he became one of sixty-eight founding members of the Yukon Order of Pioneers, a fraternal organization whose goal was to maintain law and order and settle disagreements among Yukon River prospectors and other residents. The group’s motto was “Do unto others as you would be done by,” and to qualify for membership one needed to have entered Yukon country on or before 1888. Bettles also

wrote newspaper articles about his northern adventures. One for the *San Francisco Call* described the joy he took in moose hunting around Arctic City and also in moose taming. He explained that he had captured and reared a baby moose he named Jerry and several others that he “broke to harness” and that he used them to carry heavy loads and to plow a potato patch at his Tanana trading post. He explained that Jack McQuesten had done the same at the Fortymile mining camp, concluding, “When they are tamed they are as tractable as a dog, and will do anything—come when you call them, lie down and roll over. I had a big moose, that would weigh 1000 pounds, come right into the cabin with me.”³⁵

During this period Bettles also became co-founder of the first interior Alaska newspaper with the Episcopal missionary Reverend Jules L. Prevost. While operating his mission at a trading post on the Yukon River near Nuklukyet, Prevost had obtained a small printing press to print hymns in the Koyukon language, and Bettles had the experience to operate the machine because of his work with the *Detroit Free Press* many years earlier. On January 1, 1894, the two men produced the first issue of *Yukon Press*, which they determined would be part religious tract, part mining paper. In an editorial entitled “The Remotest Periodical From Civilization Is Launched Upon the Public,” Prevost explained, “The object of this publication is to promote man’s religious, moral and mental faculties, and to develop the great resources of the [Yukon] Valley.” For Bettles the newspaper represented an opportunity to promote various Alaskan mining areas, and first among these was the Koyukuk. In his lead article, Bettles introduced the river to his readers and included a hint of drama in his description of the earliest prospecting trips:

[V]ery little attention was paid to this section of the interior by the traders or miners, until the summer of 1889, when a number of prospecting miners outfitted at the Tanana Trading Station, and loading up their sleighs with a few necessities of life, together with plenty of rabbit-skin blankets for bedding, shaped their course north-ward, not knowing what lay between them and the Arctic coast.

In the same article Bettles described the difficulties of entering the country and named locations where prospectors found enough coarse gold to pay for their season's labors. Despite his enthusiasm for the Koyukuk, he did not want to lie or hide the difficulties and so concluded with this grammatically contorted statement:

Miners coming to this section of the country from the outside world; I deem it necessary to advise . . . owing to the difficulty of opening deep diggings, as it will at least, take the greater portion of the first season before much, if any returns are realized, to come prepared if possible to meet those obligations."³⁶

The same winter this inaugural issue of *Yukon Press* reached readers, just twenty-two miners were on the Koyukuk and another six wintered near the Tanana River mouth with plans to move up the Koyukuk in the spring.³⁷

In the years after Gordon Bettles arrived in the Far North and gold was discovered in the Fortymile area, the value of Yukon River gold production had risen from \$30,000 to \$800,000, and the summer mining population rose from fewer than 200 to over 1,000 men. By 1896 Circle City, the supply depot and transportation hub for the Birch Creek diggings, was booming and more than half of the miners over-wintered in Yukon country rather than making the long journey south. Bettles declared that he approved, stating in his newspaper, "The latest wave has brought women and children, pioneer families, repositories of values, progress, devotion and loyalty; compare these courageous families to the chronic grumblers who want to get rich quick and get out."³⁸ But just as the tide of events seemed to be turning his way, Bettles' wife fell ill and required treatment not available in Alaska at that time. After placing his trading posts in charge of a caretaker, Bettles and Sophie boarded the steamship *Bertha* on September 1, 1896 en route to San Francisco. Once they arrived, Sophie underwent surgery and recovered over the winter. However, while they were in California, Bettles heard the news that was sweeping the nation—impressive amounts of gold had been discovered in a place called the Klondike—and by March the couple was crossing Chilkoot Pass with hundreds of other stampeders. As an enthusiastic prospector and a fervent believer in Alaska and the Koyukuk River in particular, Bettles was elated and felt a desperate need to reach the Far North again to witness the gold mining bonanza he had so long anticipated.³⁹

Following pages:
Founding members
of the fraternal
organization Yukon
Order of Pioneers,
1895. Gordon Bettles
appears at the far
left behind the dog.
Alaska State Library,
Wickersham Historic
Site (P277-1-46).



YUKON ORDER OF PIONEERS

GORDON BEETLES. PETE McDONALD. BARNEY HILL. FRANK BUTEAU. GEO. MATLOCK. A.
JAS. KENEDY. H.
H. HAMILTON HART. BILL. McPHEE. N. PICOTTE L.N. McQUEEN



NEERS 40 MILE 1895

L. MAYO. JOHN NELSON. BILLY LOYD J. O'DONELL. L. LA FLEM.
SCALES. PETE NELSON.

QUESTION

FRANK BOKER.

HARRY RIVERS.

JO. NAVARRO.

ENDNOTES

¹ Leroy N. McQuesten, "Recollections of Leroy N. McQuesten of Life in the Yukon, 1871-1885," reprinted from original by Yukon Order of Pioneers (Dawson, Yukon, 1952), 10. See also, Mercier, Francois X., *Recollections of the Youkon: Memories from the Years 1868-1885*, trans. and ed. Linda F. Yarborough (Anchorage: Alaska Historical Society, 1986).

² Robert N. DeArmond and Terrence Cole, "George Holt: First White Man Across the Chilkoot Pass," *Alaska History* 21 (Spring 2006), 39-47.

³ The Fortymile River got its name because of its distance from Jack McQuesten's first trading post, Fort Reliance, which he built along the upper Yukon River in 1874. The same is true for the Sixtymile and Seventymile Rivers.

⁴ Michael Gates, *Gold at Fortymile Creek: Early Days in the Yukon* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1994), 32-43.

⁵ Israel C. Russell, "A Journey Up the Yukon," *Bulletin of the American Geographical Society* 27 (1895), 158-9.

⁶ "Ed Schieffelin's Return," *Los Angeles Times*, October 10, 1883, 4. See also, Chris Allan, "On the Edge of Buried Millions': Edward Schieffelin's Search for Gold on the Yukon River, 1882-1883," *Alaska History* 28 (Spring 2013), 21-39.

⁷ Jim Bender, "Early Days in Alaska," in *Sourdough Sagas*, ed. Herbert L. Heller (Sausalito: Comstock Edition, 1967), 79.

⁸ Gates, *Gold at Fortymile Creek*, 19-20.

⁹ James Wickersham, *Old Yukon: Tales, Trails, Trials* (West Publishing, 1938), 332.

¹⁰ Henry T. Allen, "Military Reconnaissance in Alaska," in U.S. Senate, *Compilation of Narratives of Explorations in Alaska* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1900), 432-437. See also, Henry T. Allen, *An Expedition to the Copper, Tanana and Koyukuk Rivers in 1885*, ed. Terrence Cole (Anchorage: Alaska Northwest Publishing Co., 1985). Nuklukyet is today known simply as Old Station and the abandoned site is roughly seven miles downriver from the present-day village of Tanana.

¹¹ Bender, "Early Days in Alaska," 79; Joseph Ulmer, "Historical Sketch of James Bender," typescript, University of Alaska Fairbanks, Joseph Ulmer Collection, Box 4, Folder 6.

¹² Gordon C. Bettles, "Some Early Yukon River History," in *Sourdough Sagas*, ed. Herbert L. Heller (Sausalito: Comstock Edition, 1967), 109.

¹³ Bender, "Early Days in Alaska," 79; Erinia P.C. Callahan, "A Yukon Autobiography," *Alaska Journal* 5 (Spring 1975), 127-128.

¹⁴ Bender, "Early Days in Alaska," 79-80.

¹⁵ Ibid.; Bettles, "Some Early Yukon River History," 110.

¹⁶ Ibid.; Callahan, "A Yukon Autobiography," 128.

¹⁷ Henry Davis, "Recollections," in *Sourdough Sagas*, ed. Herbert L. Heller (Sausalito: Comstock Edition, 1967), 50.

¹⁸ Ibid., 51.

¹⁹ Bender, "Early Days in Alaska," 81; Bettles, "Some Early Yukon River History," 111-112.

²⁰ Bettles, "Some Early Yukon River History," 112.

²¹ Joseph Ulmer, "Historical Sketch of James Bender"; Gordon C. Bettles, "Why I Came to Alaska," intro. Candy Waugaman, *Alaska History* (Fall 1995), 1.

²² Gordon C. Bettles, "First Surgery on the Koyukuk," *Alaska Life* (July 1941), 5.

²³ Bettles, "Why I Came to Alaska," 11; *Yukon Press*, January 1, 1893, 3; Wickersham, *Old Yukon*, 149.

²⁴ Will H. Chase, ed., *Reminiscences of Captain Billie Moore* (Kansas City: Burton Publishing, 1947), 214-216; Bettles, "Why I Came to Alaska," 12.

²⁵ "Gold Mining in the Arctic Circle," *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, September 23, 1894, 4; the same article appeared in *Alaskan* (Sitka), October 6, 1894, 2 and December 8, 1894, 3.

²⁶ G.C. Bettles & Co. advertisement, *Yukon Press*, May 1, 1894, 2; Bettles, "Why I Came to Alaska," 16.

²⁷ Bettles, "Why I Came to Alaska," 14.

²⁸ Ibid., 16.

²⁹ Chase, *Reminiscences of Captain Billie Moore*, 218; William E. Brown, *Gaunt Beauty, Tenuous Life: Historic Resources Study*, Gates of the Arctic National Park and Preserve (National Park Service, 1988), 149; "Koyukuk Gold Fields," *Yukon Midnight Sun*, August 15, 1898, 1.

³⁰ Chase, *Reminiscences of Captain Billie Moore*, 218-219.

³¹ Bettles, "Why I Came to Alaska," 16.

³² Ibid.

³³ Brown, *Gaunt Beauty*, 148-150; Chase, *Reminiscences of Captain Billie Moore*, 222.

³⁴ Bettles, "First Surgery on the Koyukuk," 5; "Koyukuk Pioneer," *Daily Klondike Nugget*, August 9, 1902, 1; Robert E. King, "Northern Alaska's First Printing Press and Its Sometimes Curious History," *Alaska History* 14 (Spring/Fall 1999), 42-47.

³⁵ Gordon C. Bettles, "Moose-Hunting in Alaska," *San Francisco Call*, November 1, 1896, 19. Bettles and McQuesten were not the first to tame moose, see Laurel Andrews, "Of Moose and Men: A Brief History of Domesticated Moose in Alaska," *Alaska Dispatch*, January 2, 2016.

³⁶ "News from the Koukuk," *Yukon Press*, January 1, 1894, 2; "Runs a Famous Frontier Journal," *San Francisco Call*, October 21, 1898, 8.

³⁷ *Yukon Press*, January 1, 1894, 1.

³⁸ *Yukon Press*, June 1, 1896, 1.

³⁹ Bettles, "Why I Came to Alaska," 20-21; "Gordon C. Bettles Has Been There and Is Going to Return," *Anaconda Standard*, February 3, 1897, 3.



The Kanuti River passes through boreal forest in Kanuti National Wildlife Refuge, 2005. Courtesy of Bill Raftan, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service.

Chapter 2: Room for Thousands—Choosing the Koyukuk Over the Klondike

The Koyukuk is a difficult country to reach and none should undertake it unless well equipped to cope against the obstacles along the way. But it is a big country, full of virgin creeks, and bids fair to become the ‘Klondike’ of Alaska.

—Yukon Midnight Sun, August 15, 1898

The genesis of the Klondike-Alaska gold rush was the discovery of gold on August 16, 1896 by a Tagish-Tlingit man named Skookum Jim Mason and his partners, Dawson Charlie and the former California miner George Carmack, along a tributary of the Klondike River about fifty miles from the border with Alaska. They described finding thick flakes of gold “lying like cheese in a sandwich” along the streambed, and by the following day Carmack had filed a mining claim. That winter word of their success spread throughout the local area, and soon Yukon River pioneers who had been prospecting in the region for years moved in to stake claims on the richest ground. In spring 1897, after the ice broke up in the Yukon River, they headed out with bags of nuggets and dust. The news broke to the outside world when the Alaska Commercial Company’s ship *Excelsior* reached San Francisco on July 14 with a ton and a half of gold on board worth more than \$500,000. Three days later the *Portland* arrived in Seattle with nearly one million dollars’ worth of gold and the rush exploded. Pandemonium erupted in San Francisco, Seattle, Portland, and Tacoma as thousands of would-be prospectors scrambled to find supplies and transportation. As one observer in Seattle explained,

All that anyone hears at present is ‘Klondyke.’ It is impossible to escape it. It is talked in the morning; it is discussed at lunch; it demands attention at the dinner table; it is all one hears during the interval of his after-dinner smoke; and at night one dreams about mountains of yellow metal with nuggets as big as fire plugs.¹

The irresistible draw of overnight wealth was not the only reason the Klondike was a sensation; the United States was also experiencing serious financial doldrums that made a difficult Far North expedition seem attractive to ordinary Americans. Similar to the Great Depression in the 1930s, the Panic of 1893 was a financial disaster that started with a stock market crash that seriously depleted the U.S. Treasury and threw thousands out of work. Soon 500 banks closed, over 15,000 businesses went under, and in some states soup kitchens opened to feed the destitute. The effects of this collapse lingered for years, and as a result, thousands were looking for a chance to escape this national malaise. When news of Klondike gold arrived, they dropped everything and stampeded to the new El Dorado, and it did not seem to matter that most

Headlines like this announcing the arrival of Klondike miners with sacks of nuggets and dust were enough to cause gold fever across the United States and around the world. *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, July 17, 1897.



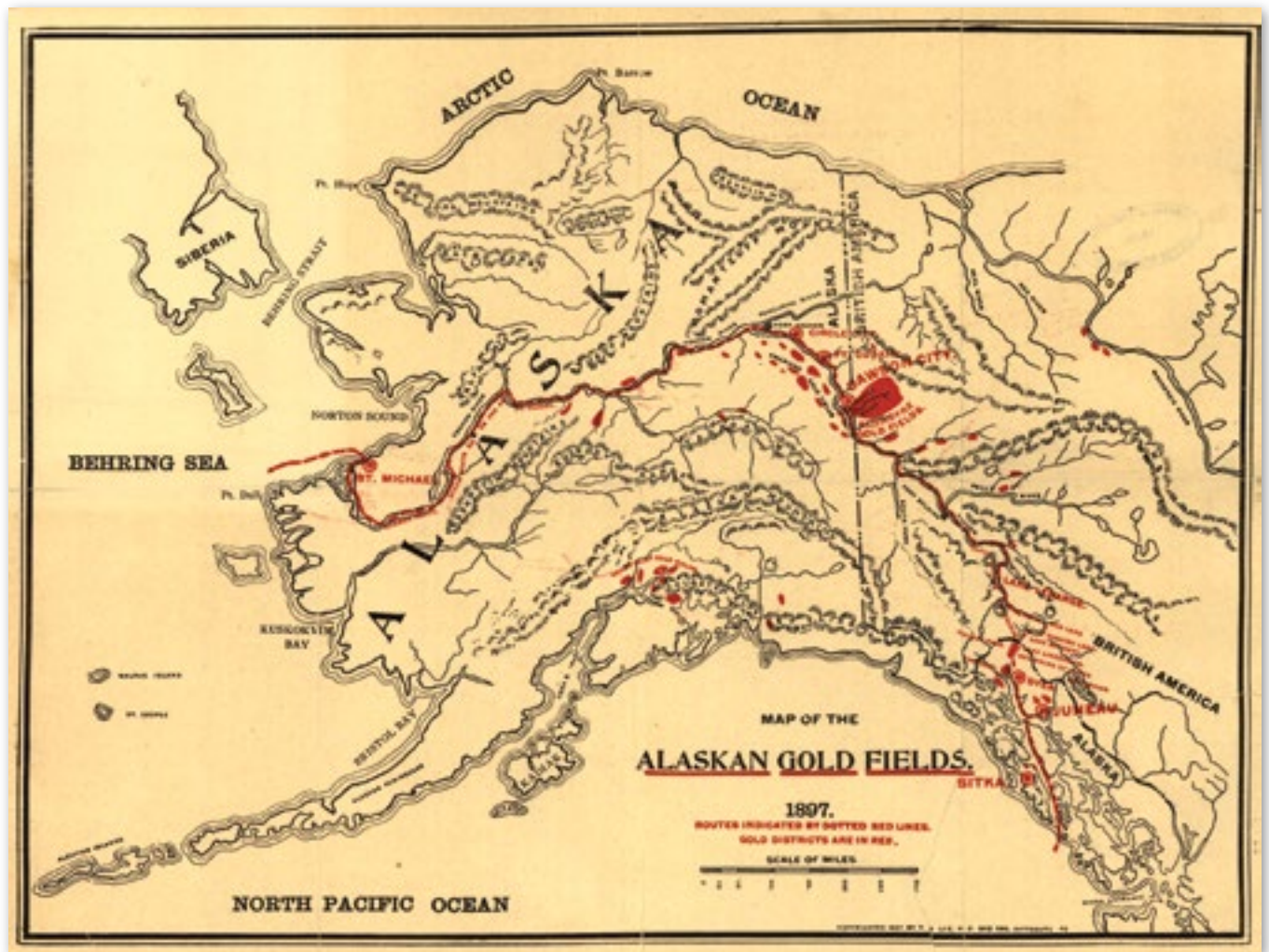
lacked mining experience or that the chances of striking it rich were quite low—a potent combination of dreams and desperation pushed them northward.

In addition, American journalists played a central role in both promoting the Klondike and in reporting the action as it unfolded. The major newspapers sent correspondents who described the race to gold as a glorious spectacle and an odyssey of the average man. Some newspapers were prone to exaggeration or printed unfounded rumors; others did the bidding of business interests in the coastal towns vying for advantage in the Klondike supply trade.² However, most provided accurate reporting of an exciting and fast-moving phenomenon. The *Los Angeles Times*, for example, commented on regional trends as the race accelerated:

The Klondike fever is raging in the Middle Western States. It is estimated, on an accurate basis, that 25,000 men in Illinois, Wisconsin, Iowa, Indiana and Michigan are planning to go to the Yukon this spring. Illinois has hardly a town in which there is not an association of Klondike interests—men of professions, business men, and men who work for wages. The permanency of the undertakings prove that they are not mushrooms, or the result of a passing mania.³

As many as a 100,000 people mobilized for the Far North, though most turned back when their courage or their pocketbooks were exhausted. Of those who pressed on, most followed one of two principal routes: the land route over the Chilkoot Pass or the all-water route by ship through the North Pacific to the Bering Sea and up the length of the Yukon River by steamboat. Whichever route they took, these stampedeers knew almost nothing of the country they were entering and their plans, such as they were, involved simply arriving and digging in. The national journal *Leslie's Weekly* declared that the Klondike “stands for millions of gold, and is a synonym for the advancement, after unspeakable suffering, of hundreds of miners from poverty to affluence in a brief period of a few months.” The *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* predicted that the Klondike stampede “is going to constitute one of the greatest migrations in the history of the world.”⁴

However, almost as soon as the Klondike rush began, stories began to trickle out suggesting that the gold fields there were “all filled up,” meaning that the early arrivals had established claims on the richest ground and that the only money to be made was working for wages on someone else’s claim or purchasing a claim of one’s own at wildly inflated



prices. For most stampeder, working for wages was not part of the dream and many who reached Dawson City, the gateway to the Klondike, could only hang their heads in despair. As one reporter explained,

The bitter cup of disappointment will be drained to the dregs by many who are least fortified to stand tribulations. With the idea that all the river banks and hillsides were but the soil of gold and domes of nuggets, they will realize that every known

claim of richness is pre-empted, and that additional discoveries will only be the result of laborious effort. Then, when the pangs of hunger come to destroy strength and courage, untold misery and in many cases death will follow.”⁵

For the stampeder who had not yet reached Alaska or Canadian territory, there were several choices. A person could give up and return home empty-handed. Or, one could search for an alternative to the

A route map to the major gold fields of Alaska and the Klondike, 1897. Note that the Koyukuk is not marked as a mining location and Dawson City is mistakenly located on the American side of the border. Library of Congress.

SIDENOTE 3:

GOLD-SEEKING ON THE AMERICAN SIDE OF THE LINE

Filled with disgust at the treatment accorded them by the Canadian officials, they have swarmed in thousands below the border, and Alaska is getting the benefit.

—Seattle Post-Intelligencer, January 22, 1899

From the beginning, Americans rushing to the Klondike gold fields resented what they regarded as the “petty tyranny” of Canadian authority and British law. They resented the limits placed on the size of mining claims. They resented the ten percent royalty tax on gold and the fees required to maintain a claim. They grumbled when the Canadian government seized mineral claims for its own use. And as this San Francisco reporter explained, the Yanks were looking for an alternative: “The conditions are all so hateful here that the American citizen, who composes so large a proportion of the population, ever has his ear strained for reports of the expected strike somewhere, anywhere, on the American side of the line.”

The reality was that most of the rich ground in the Klondike was staked before the rush even got started, and latecomers had only a few options: work for wages, prospect somewhere else, or go home. Many disgruntled Americans floated down the Yukon River to Alaska. And soon, stampeders newly arrived from Seattle and San Francisco were bypassing the Klondike altogether and searching instead for gold on Alaskan rivers and streams. One stampeder said this about why he preferred the idea of the Koyukuk: “It is in Alaska too, and I don’t care much for the man who would not rather mine under the Stars and Stripes than in British territory.”



Canadian police escort \$400,000 in gold from the Klondike gold fields, 1898. University of Washington, Eric A. Hegg Collection (496).

Klondike—perhaps a Yukon River tributary somewhere in Alaska that might offer the much-dreamed-of golden horde.

The Koyukuk River's reputation as a viable substitute for the Klondike began early. On August 14, 1897 an article appeared in Sitka's newspaper *The Alaskan* that described the efforts of a Yukon River mail carrier named Jack Carr who had recently arrived in that town and was promoting creeks downriver of the Klondike on the American side of the international border. As Carr explained,

On this side of the boundary line are many square miles of territory the prospector's pick has never touched; rivers and creeks whose waters have never been troubled by the introduction of sluice boxes. There is gold in all of them, and the rush of thousands of men, who will spread out over the country like the opening of a fan, will mean development of American mines on a tremendous scale.

Carr continued, offering this note about the river Gordon Bettles had spent so many years promoting:

About 600 miles below Circle city is the Kuykuk river [sic], which is at least 800 miles long. The Indians on this river, working with their crude rockers, are making from \$10 to \$12 a day. Three different outfits left Circle city on May 28 last to go prospecting on this river. They told me they believed their chances on the Kuykuk were better than [in the] Clondyke.⁶

The news that the local Koyukon Athabascans were bringing out impressive amounts

of gold was repeated in various newspapers. For example, William D. Wood, the former mayor of Seattle who resigned to form the Seattle & Yukon Trading Company, reported,

The Koyukuk Indians always have dust when they come out to trade, usually about \$200 to the man. Reports substantially to the above effect have been received by me from a score of white and Indian miners who have worked on the river in independent interviews, and they confirm one another fully. I find them and many others anxious to go back to the Koyukuk as soon as a base of supply is established there.⁷

Other articles were conspicuously short on details, but one thing was clear—the Koyukuk was gaining a reputation as a profitable option for stampeders put off by discouraging reports from the Klondike.

By November 1897 a story emerged that promised to entice potential Koyukuk stampeders. This time the report came from David Ward, described as a “miner and geologist” who was passing through Tacoma, Washington on his way home to Kansas City. According to Ward, he and two Koyukon men had been working their way to the Koyukuk headwaters when one afternoon they stopped and decided to prospect a creek that showed promise. While he was driving stakes to erect a cache for their provisions, Ward looked down and saw gold nuggets in the loose dirt at his feet. As the newspaper explained, “They had struck what proved to be a pocket and worked it all night, taking out nuggets which in places were as thick as potatoes in a hill.” Ward took \$800 in gold from one hole and determined on the spot to enlist his friends to form a mining company and return as soon as possible. His

When rumors emerged that the Klondike gold fields were exhausted, many stampeder tried their luck on Alaskan rivers and streams. Here men pan for signs of gold on the Koyukuk River, 1898. Alaska State Library, Claude Hobart Collection (P425-6-26).

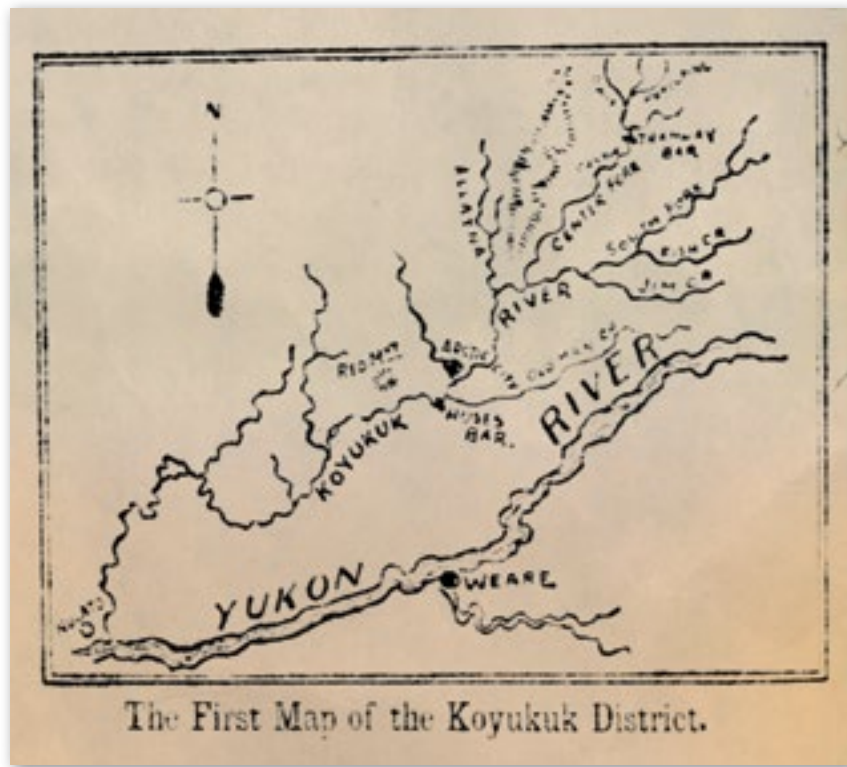


final statement was just the sort of thing that would encourage others:

There is room for thousands there, and I will gladly make public further details after the claims are located. We shall go to St. Michael's in our own vessel, and take along a small steamer to ascend the river. I found one place where the course of the river can be diverted and the present bed laid bare for a distance of over thirty miles. It will be found full of gold. Everything indicates it.⁸

By July 1898 it was clear the Koyukuk had captured the interest and imagination

of many and was becoming a major destination for gold-seekers. Some of the earliest stampeder were following unconventional routes to reach the exotic new diggings. In a few cases they landed on the western Alaskan coast at the village of Unalakleet and traveled overland to the Yukon River at Kaltag or Nulato where they hoped to catch a ride on a steamboat traveling north. Others were starting at the Alaska Commercial Company post of Fort Hamlin near the mouth of the Dall River and then trekking northwest into Koyukuk country. A third route went overland from the vicinity of Nuklukyet and the Tanana River mouth northward along the Tozitna River and over a mountain pass to the upper Koyukuk. This last route was the



As the Koyukuk River's reputation grew, this early map appeared with a caption explaining that "it is on the American side and offers great inducements to the old and new prospectors." *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, July 20, 1898.

same taken by the earliest white prospectors in the 1880s.

By far the easiest way to reach the Koyukuk was by ship, starting in Seattle or some other west coast port and sailing to St. Michael where river-going steamboats were readied to carry passengers up the Yukon River and the Koyukuk. One of first obstacles faced by steamboat captains was the forty miles of open ocean between St. Michael and the Yukon River mouth because the flat-bottomed paddlewheel steamers were not designed for sea swells and strong currents. At least one Koyukuk-bound boat captain thought he had a solution. Captain George Wonson of Gloucester, Massachusetts designed a 75-foot custom "double-bottomed" steamboat for the Koyukuk Exploration Company of which he was the president. The company was made up of sixteen Massa-

chusetts men hoping to ship tons of supplies northward, and Wonson designed the vessel so that it could travel by sea from Seattle to Alaska and then be modified for navigation up the Yukon and Koyukuk Rivers. For the 2,400-mile ocean voyage, his design included a number of removable keels for stability and two steam-powered propellers. Once the ship reached the Yukon, the keels and propellers could be removed and a paddlewheel substituted. The Massachusetts ship captain named his creation the *Dorothy* (after his newborn daughter) and it became the first of many vessels to deliver groups of men to the upper Koyukuk.⁹

Although he did not know it when he left home, Jasper Wyman would also end up searching for gold in the Koyukuk. Wyman had grown up on a farm in Illinois near the railroad hub of Galesburg, and because he



This stock certificate for twelve \$25 shares was signed on March 19, 1898 by Claus Rodine who later became the secretary for the Galesburg-Alaska Mining & Developing Company of Illinois. Anchorage Museum, Jasper N. Wyman Collection.

was eager to reach the northern gold fields, he joined a group of twenty-four other stampeders heading to Alaska. The group incorporated the Galesburg-Alaska Mining & Developing Company in March 1898, and each of the stockholders contributed \$700 and signed on to seek their fortunes in what they assumed would be the Klondike gold fields. Unlike so many gold-seekers who set out with insufficient funds, most of the members of the Illinois company were successful in their chosen

fields and could afford the cost of the expedition. There was Wyman's boyhood chum Norman Aldrich, who worked as an architect in Galesburg; the physician James Hewitt; the real estate and loan agent Claus Rodine; the geologist Fred Allen; the mining assayer Orville White; and the Galesburg banker Arthur Anderson. In addition, the company included five farmers, a cook, a house-mover, a blacksmith, a butcher, a barber, a school teacher, and a student who chose to postpone



his studies at the University of Illinois. Three women also joined the expedition—the wife of Dr. Hewitt, Mrs. Campbell (who traveled with her husband and young son), and Mrs. Campbell’s sister Josie.¹⁰

In late April, while this sizable group traveled westward to Seattle aboard the Great Northern Railway, they noticed that the cars were carrying many passengers bound for Far North gold fields, evidence that they were taking part in an unprecedented migration of the hopeful and the ambitious. Once they arrived in Seattle, Jasper Wyman, Norman Aldrich, and the group’s machinist William Olsen set out to explore the city. Wyman had his camera under his arm, and what they found was a young community suddenly buzzing with activity as new shops and shipping compa-

nies mobilized to accommodate gold-seekers anxious to reach Alaska and the Klondike. As Wyman noted, “The city of Seattle is scattered over the hills. It looks much like a town just grown up out of the woods as it is all brush stumps and logs between houses.”¹¹ The sightseeing was short-lived because they faced the urgent business of securing passage aboard a ship and purchasing supplies for two years in the Far North.

The Illinois company planned to board the 165-foot schooner *G.W. Watson* under the command of Captain Lars Pierson who would take them through the North Pacific and the Bering Sea to St. Michael.¹² Also, the company purchased the lumber and machine parts to build a 75-foot steamboat they later named the *Illinois*, which they would then

The members of the Galesburg-Alaska Mining & Developing Company at Leschi Park in Seattle before buying supplies for their gold-seeking excursion, May 2, 1898. The photographer Jasper Wyman is on the left holding the shutter release cable. Anchorage Museum, Jasper N. Wyman Collection (B1989.24.3).



At the Seattle waterfront the three-masted schooner *G.W. Watson* (with American flag) waits for passengers and cargo, May 1, 1898. Anchorage Museum, Jasper N. Wyman Collection (B1989.24.2).

use to penetrate Alaska's interior. To conserve space, some pre-built sections of the steamboat were "knocked down" and packed into crates and all the steamboat materials were stored in the hull of the *G.W. Watson*. In addition, they purchased a 41-foot steam-powered launch called the *Silver Wave* that had seen service on the Mississippi River and a 50-foot barge to carry additional cargo. Both of these would be lashed to the upper deck of the *G.W. Watson* during the ocean voyage. Lastly, the company bought dredging machinery described as a "centrifugal sand pump, of eighty yards capacity, and the latest gold saving devices." They hoped this mining equipment would help them find gold and speed up the process of collection.¹³

In his diary, Wyman reported that when he was not helping to load cargo he was shopping for odds and ends and packing the clothes supplied to each member of the mining company. The list was impressive: two heavy lined duck coats, two duck vests, three pairs of blue overalls, three suits of woolen underwear, two light sweaters, three flannel shirts, two blue jackets, five pairs of mittens (wool and jersey), one pair of buckskin mittens, one Mackinaw suit, one hat, one cap of fur Wombat, two pairs of German socks, two pairs of rubber hip boots, two pairs of felts, three pairs of felt overshoes, one pair of leather "Klondike" shoes, one fur robe, two pairs of blankets, one suit of light underwear, and one fur Galloway calf hide overcoat. Each

man also received either a 30-30 Winchester rifle or a shotgun.¹⁴ In Seattle's shops Wyman purchased additional clothing as well as needles and thread, buttons, a match case, comb, razor, stamps, paper and envelopes, pencils, a money belt, a pocket knife and one bottle of gun oil. He also managed to buy a "fine, fur overcoat" at a dramatic discount from a stamper who lost heart and changed his plans.¹⁵ All told, between the boats, mining equipment, food, tools, and personal items, the group's outfit weighed a hefty 150 tons.

On May 19, 1898, after several weeks of preparation, the *G.W. Watson* took on 130 passengers and 100 tons of coal to sell to Yukon River steamboats and then sat waiting for a tugboat to tow the vessel out of the harbor and into Puget Sound where the wind would fill its sails. As they waited, the Illinois company's unofficial comedian, a farmer named Eli Juda, entertained the group with his antics and an "old grey-whiskered man" played *Yankee Doodle* on an accordion. Wyman reported in his diary that two other ships—the *Moonlight* and *Jane Gray*—departed for Alaska first and then the *G.W. Watson* got its chance. Wyman described the scene: "As we pulled out in the sound we could look back against the hills and bluffs of the city and see crowds of men and women waving a farewell, and at many houses the women were waving their aprons and handkerchiefs."¹⁶ This cheerful atmosphere would not last long.

On the first day of sailing a serious storm blew up that tossed the schooner like a cork, shredding one of its sails and sending giant waves over the deck. On the first night, Wyman and nine other men were sleeping inside the *Silver Wave*, which was positioned cross-wise to the deck of the *G.W. Watson*, when the waves broke the heavy chains and ropes and nearly threw the steamer overboard. Wyman and his comrades jumped free in the darkness and

escaped across the deck in their underwear. For two days the storm tossed the ship and most of the passengers suffered terribly from sea-sickness. The captain even concluded it was necessary to confiscate all firearms to prevent suicide attempts. Wyman reported, "We were all in our bunks and almost every man on board was heaving and gagging and sick as could be."¹⁷ Wyman was so persistently ill that he was confined to bed for much of the voyage, and as the ship moved northward he and the other passengers suffered additionally from cramped quarters, lice, and bad food.¹⁸

On June 5 the ship reached the Aleutian Islands near Unimak Pass, the opening between two islands that allows relatively safe passage into the Bering Sea. Unfortunately deteriorating weather caused the captain to lose his bearings and sail back and forth for two days, at one point nearly wrecking the ship on hidden rocks. Wyman reported that the passengers panicked when they saw the captain's reaction to the danger. Some fell to their knees in prayer while others began preparing whatever life boats or life preservers were available. After approaching another sailing vessel headed their direction, the captain at last figured out his position in relation to the islands and sailed safely through. However, these events filled Wyman with dread and the whole experience had left him feeling wretched. On June 7 he wrote in his journal,

This is a horrible life we are living. Worse than hogs. The temperature is six degrees of freezing and no fire to warm by, and dirt and filth to no name. . . . Mr. Aldrich came to my bedside and waited on me. He has cared for me all the time, but this evening his kind face brought tears to my eyes and I have to take a good cry. I could stand it no longer.¹⁹

Once the ship entered the Bering Sea and the winds calmed, Wyman and others in his party regained their appetites and morale, and like many gold-rush Argonauts they reported seeing snow-capped Aleutian volcanoes belching smoke. Before long they also glimpsed floating chunks of sea ice—a reminder of their northerly course—and Wyman arranged the passengers on deck for a group portrait. By June 15 they arrived at St. Michael, dropped anchor two miles offshore, and became only the second ship in 1898 to reach that distant Alaskan outpost and launching point for so many gold rush expeditions. They had arrived in record time—26 days.²⁰

Passengers on the *G.W. Watson* were greeted by several rowboats filled with soldiers stationed at St. Michael who were anxious for news from the rest of the United States. They had only just heard about the Spanish-American War raging in Cuba and the Philippines, and prior to that the only news reports they had were six months old. From the soldiers, the Illinois group learned that the Arctic sea ice had been out of the bay for only three days, so they had arrived at just the right moment. Not surprisingly, Wyman was delighted to have reached St. Michael and marveled at the strange landscape before him. He would later write on the back of a photograph he took that first day, “The little grassy mossy beach seemed like a paradise. Not a tree or bush of any kind can be seen on the hills around; lots of beautiful flowers bloom in the damp grass.”²¹ While visiting the tent camps of other stampeders, the Illinoisans gathered information about gold discoveries and learned the terrible news that the *Jane Gray*, the ship that left Puget Sound just hours before the *G.W. Watson*, had foundered in the storm and that thirty-four passengers had drowned. This was a sobering reminder of the dangers the Illinois group had just faced and the reality that in their

haste to deliver stampeders to Alaska many unscrupulous transportation companies were using unseaworthy vessels that sank with such frequency they were dubbed “coffin ships.”²²

But instead of pondering their mortality, Wyman and his group explored their new surroundings and began the week-long process of unloading the equipment and provisions. According to Wyman, the population of St. Michael included 180 whites of whom there were 28 soldiers and 4 women. The Alaska Native residents, including coastal Yupik and Inupiaq Eskimos and Athabascans from the interior, roughly doubled this number. As a rancher who grew up on a farm, Wyman found the place utterly alien, noting in his diary, “Everything is so much different here than what I am used to that it creates much [wonder]. There are no horses here and but 2 cows and 1 bull. Everything is drawn by dogs.” The two-story hotel at St. Michael was called Fort Get-There, a reference to the fact that the typical customer was desperate to get to the Klondike roughly 800 miles away, and a narrow boardwalk paralleled a neat string of frame warehouses, each managed by a different transportation or mercantile firm. Wyman noted that buildings where residents lived were a hodgepodge of styles—including log, sod, canvas and galvanized iron, and animal hides—and that several American flags flew over the stampeders’ tent camps.²³

Within a few days, many more vessels arrived and St. Michael’s beachfront became a makeshift shipyard where stampeders scrambled to assemble their flat-bottomed steamboats. Before the Illinois group could begin work on their own vessel, a violent storm and extreme high tide damaged the hull of the *Silver Wave* and filled their barge with water and sand, but they pressed on. After much hard work, the *Illinois* took shape, twenty-five feet wide and sixty-five feet long with fifteen feet of deck space at the bow. The vessel had

ten cabins on each side and built-in ladders to the wheelhouse and upper deck where two rowboats were secured. On the main deck, a combination dining room and social hall was the only common space. According to tradition, the boat's sternwheel was painted red and the rest of the vessel white, and on its flag pole, beneath the stars and stripes, flew a pennant that read *Illinois* in black letters.²⁴ Like Jasper Wyman, the company's secretary Claus Rodine was also writing letters home, and he described the challenges of working on the steamboat at high latitudes:

It is day here all the time and we do not hardly know when to get to sleep. The mosquitoes are thick and they bite like fury. There are lumps all over my hands and neck. Some of the men are wearing mosquito netting. I have a hat with netting on but as yet I have not worn it. We are building our boat, the large steamer, and will I hope to be ready to sail for the Yukon River and the gold fields by July 4th '98.²⁵

When he could get away, Wyman photographed St. Michael and the tent camps where he and his fellow gold-seekers were living. He also photographed local indigenous people and whenever the opportunity arose he traded for moccasins and mukluks made of sealskin, fur mittens and parkas, and trinkets made of ivory that they made to sell to gold-seekers. In fact, he was so fond of trading that his friends started calling him "Mukluk Jap." Although Wyman reported in letters to his family that he was having a grand time, he also hinted at tensions that threatened his mining company's future. In most cases, these companies were rudimentary democracies—all major decisions were made by majority vote—and members could leave with their

share of provisions if the majority approved. At St. Michael three members of the Galesburg-Alaska Mining & Developing Company had already taken their provisions and struck out on their own. In a letter to his family, Wyman stated that these defections were an inevitable and perhaps positive development:

S.S. Soper, our barber, left the company yesterday and put another man in his place and it was a good change too. Several of the other boys are talking strong of leaving and I wish they would too. I don't think Dr. Hewitt will stay with us long, his wife says she won't go any farther than here. He is no good to the company anyway, we don't need doctors up here anyway; if one takes care of himself there is no danger of sickness . . .

Later in the same letter, Wyman assured his family that his good friend Norman Aldrich would always be his partner in pursuing gold and that he would not let the problems of the company foil his plans: "Don't fret about me looking out for 'Jap.' I have got wise. I am aware that I am a good ways off and not here altogether for my health. I am strictly looking out for n[umber] one and I mean to have a piece of money if anyone else gets any, sec."²⁶

In spite of this internal strife, the company did not disband and work on the *Illinois* continued until it was completed on July 17. But where would they go? Back in Illinois the plan had been to steam up the Yukon River to Dawson City and to reach the Klondike gold fields—that was everyone's plan at the time—but now they were reconsidering. Two young men had recently visited the Illinois camp fresh from Dawson City, and they carried about \$5,000 each in gold which Wyman described as "lots of dust and nice

Following pages: Gold-seekers aboard the G.W. Watson as they near St. Michael on Alaska's western coast, June 14, 1898. The group includes the members of the Galesburg-Alaska Mining & Developing Co. Anchorage Museum, Jasper N. Wyman Collection (B1989.24.14).



Gold Seekers on G.W. Watson



Schooner Bering Sea, June 14-1898



This beach near St. Michael, July 15, 1898. The steamer *Research* (foreground) was imported from Liverpool, England and joined the stampede up the Koyukuk River. Anchorage Museum, Jasper N. Wyman Collection (B1989.24.41).



Members of Jasper Wyman's group relax in a canvas tent on the treeless tundra near St. Michael, July 13, 1898. In the background a steamboat is under construction. Anchorage Museum, Jasper N. Wyman Collection (B1989.24.39).

nuggets, some as large as hickory nuts.”²⁷ But there was reason to be concerned that the Klondike might no longer be the best option. As Wyman explained in a letter,

Lots of vessels have arrived here now, and hundreds of people. The town [St. Michael] is full of people, none have got started up the river yet, but lots of people coming down the river from Dawson to go back to their homes and some report very favorable and some tell some horrible sad stories, and hardships they have gone through and most of them advise everybody to not go to Dawson, it is overrun now, but everybody speaks well of the Koyukuk River and large numbers are going up it this season. We have our boat ready to launch in the morning.²⁸

In addition to hearing promising stories about the Koyukuk, the group was considering the Tanana River, which had also recently gained a reputation as a promising alternative to the Klondike.²⁹ But when the shareholders voted, those who believed in the Klondike or the Tanana were outnumbered. It was decided that the Galesburg-Alaska Mining & Developing Company would explore the Koyukuk River. The company also voted to hire a steamboat pilot named Mr. Trenchet who had already been to the upper Koyukuk and claimed he knew where to find an area of “very rich digging” about 150 or 200 miles above Arctic City.³⁰ In a letter Claus Rodine commented on the new plans:

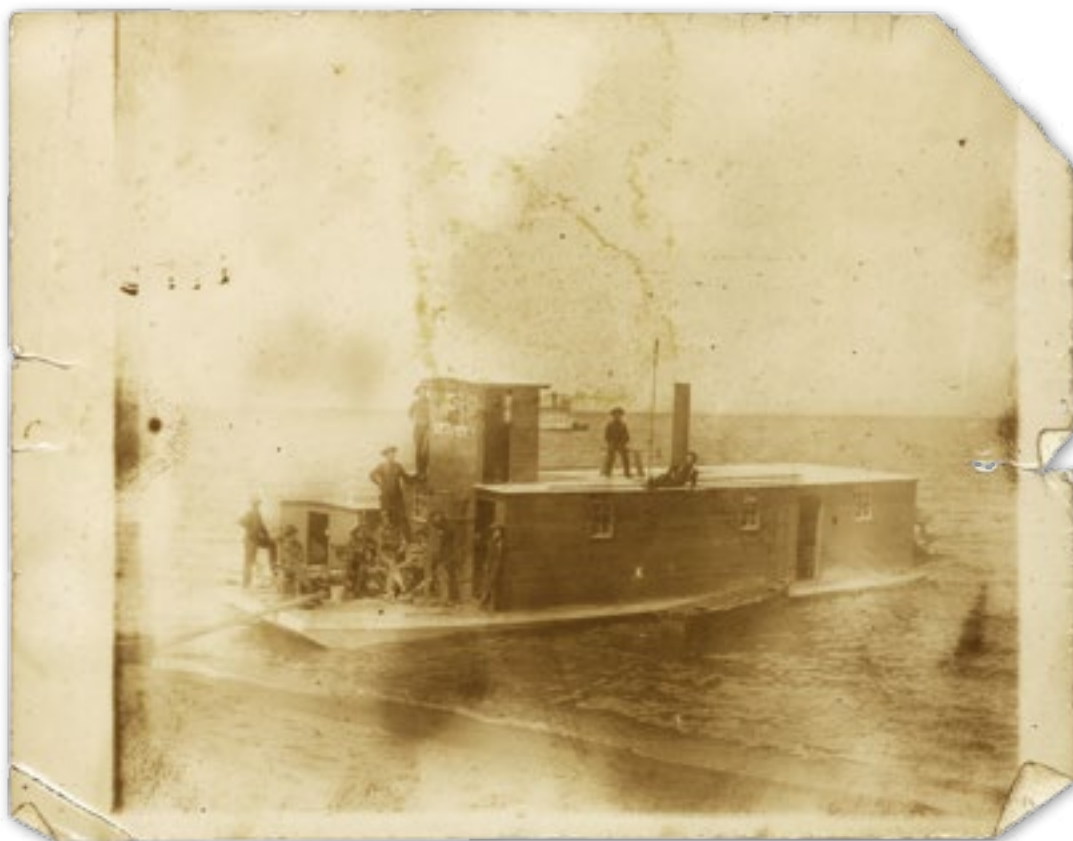
It is the intention of the company to go up the Koyukuk River as far as we possibly can to Arctic City if it is possible, but as our boat draws 3 feet of water it is hardly possible that we can get up that far, but we want to

if we can. It is reported that there is plenty of gold on the Koyukuk [and] we understand that there is a big stampede for that country.³¹

On July 17, Wyman and his compatriots boarded the *Illinois* and navigated out of St. Michael Bay with the barge tied on the bow and the *Silver Wave* following behind. Just two hours before leaving, the group agreed to take on board a couple they had met in Seattle, Mr. and Mrs. Brewster. Their ship had sunk 250 miles after leaving the Seattle waterfront, but the passengers were rescued by another ship and no lives were lost.³² Mrs. Brewster would become one of only a handful of white women known to have participated in the Koyukuk stampede. Departing at the same time was the small steamer *Beaver* with twelve prospectors from Beaver Falls, Pennsylvania who had made friends among the Illinoisans. However, the *Illinois* soon fell behind. First, the engine of the *Silver Wave* began to malfunction and had to be towed, and then, once the *Illinois* reached the mouth of the Yukon River, the pilot faced a labyrinth of shifting channels broken by small islands and shoals that vexed all but the most experienced navigators. The steamboat spent over twenty-four hours on a sand bar before the tides shifted enough for it to break free. These were the first of many problems that plagued Wyman and fellow stampedeers during their river journey.

In spite of a continuous round of mishaps—steaming up dead-end channels, mechanical problems, and a lost anchor—the *Illinois* did manage to make progress and eventually reached a string of villages that represented a territorial shift from Yupik Eskimo lands nearer the coast to Koyukon Athabaskan territory farther up the Yukon River: Andreafsky, Russian Mission, Holy Cross, Anvik, and Nulato. Claus Rodine, who like his fellow

Members of a mining company from Beaver Falls, Pennsylvania leave St. Michael aboard the *Beaver*, July 17, 1898. In the background the *Illinois* also prepares to make the ocean crossing to the mouth of the Yukon River. Alaska State Library, Claude Hobart Collection (P425-6-23).



gold-seekers made little distinction between the two groups, wrote in a letter to his family:

Every time we stop the Indians—men, women, and children—will come to see us. They as a rule will have salmon (fresh) to exchange for crackers, flour and tea, 3 articles they like very much. The Indians have overalls and caps and the women have shawls and calico dresses and parkas. They dress tolerable well and they all wear mukluks for footwear, waterproof. At most every village there are some that can speak English plain enough for us to understand.³³

From the beginning, the *Silver Wave* had been more of a hindrance than a help,

and they considered abandoning both the smaller steamer and their barge. But instead the group decided to store some cargo at the village of Holy Cross and give the small steamer to that town's Jesuit missionaries with the understanding that it would be reclaimed later. Along this stretch of the river, the Illinois group also hired the first of several Alaska Native pilots whose knowledge of the river would help to ensure their success. The pilots charged ten cents per mile, and it soon became clear that nearly all of the steamboats on the Yukon paid for this local expertise. Native woodchoppers also sold wood to the steamboats for \$10 per cord and were able to sell all they could cut.³⁴

The greatest danger to the expedition, it seems, were internal disputes. During a



morning meeting, Fred Allen, the group's geologist from Ottawa, Illinois, proposed that he take the *Silver Wave* and 200 dollars in provisions and leave the company for a trip to the Klondike. He was voted down, but the problem of disgruntled stockholders did not disappear. Wyman commented in his diary, "Trouble still continues, much dissatisfaction arises in the Company. . . . [Allen] is still with the Co. but declares he will leave them sooner or later." The stress of mechanical problems and the men bickering took its toll on Wyman who expressed frustration and defiance:

We are now certainly having a touch of [the] goldseeker's life on the

Yukon. Our troubles have begun. I have been considerable worried today. In fact, I could not keep the tears back . . . [But] I can never never think of turning back without success. I feel as if I would rather leave my bones here in the cold bleak territory of Alaska than to ever return home disappointed.³⁵

One source of stress for Wyman and the others was the demands of feeding the *Illinois'* boilers. The steamboat burned between four and five cords of wood in a day, and the ship's whistle was the signal that the supply was low and the men needed to again brave the frequent rain showers and clouds of

The Illinois and the company's barge and smaller steamer *Silver Wave* pause for repairs while advancing up the Yukon River, July 24, 1898. William Campbell, the expedition's only youngster, stands on the upper deck in a hat equipped with a mosquito net. University of Alaska Fairbanks Archives, Candy Waugaman Collection (2001-111-26).



At a Koyukon Athabascan fish camp on the Yukon River, salmon are drying on racks and a stamper chats with a local man and his children, August 7, 1898. Anchorage Museum, Jasper N. Wyman Collection (B1989.24.63).

mosquitoes and gnats to cut wood in the forest. They wore mosquito netting or bandanas as protection, and it could take up to five hours each day to cut enough wood. Once Wyman paused in mid-letter to write, with obvious sarcasm, “There goes the whistle, that means stop, get your axe and chop wood—continual round of pleasure.”³⁶ Meanwhile, other speedier steamboats passed the *Illinois* on their way to the Klondike and other gold fields along the Yukon River corridor.

On August 8 the *Illinois* stopped at a small trading post called Koyukuk, or Pickarts’ Landing, run by the brothers Frank and Charles Pickarts. This was the last post office and supply depot for vessels venturing up the Koyukuk River, and some of the men took the opportunity to purchase axes and saws

and to post letters home. But if they believed their journey would grow easier, they were wrong. As they turned north on the Koyukuk River they found it generally narrow and winding and frequently too shallow for their fully loaded steamboat. Over the next three weeks, the *Illinois* repeatedly ran aground as they made their way toward their goal—Arctic City. They had been accustomed to traveling all day and night, but the nights were becoming increasingly dark and cold, and they had to anchor around midnight to wait for the light to return. The steamboat’s engine continued to have problems with blown gaskets, and convenient supplies of wood were harder to find as the northern forest thinned. The men got little sleep and toiled day after day in frigid knee-deep or even waist-deep



water, pulling on ropes or straining against levers and blocks, trying to wrench the *Illinois* free of underwater obstacles. Even so, Wyman and others disembarked whenever they got a chance to start prospecting. In a letter, Wyman wrote, “You ought to see me scratching around in the gravel very time the boat stops, with my little magnifying glass, looking for gold. Oh, I’ll find it, if it is to be found.” He reported finding “small colors” on most of the bars he sampled, which only fueled his confidence that what the old miners said was true—the richer deposits of gold were farther north.³⁷

On August 21, the Illinois group finally caught up to the *Beaver*, which they had last seen at the Yukon River mouth, and the two groups of stampederers reached Arctic City together. What they discovered was that only one cabin remained of the old trading post established by Captain Billie Moore and Gordon Bettles five years earlier and that a group of stampederers from Boston had arrived on the *Edith M. Kyle* and were now building their own frontier metropolis just downstream. A sign attached to a pair of spruce poles erected at the river’s edge announced to arriving steamboats—“Arctic

Stampederers from Beaver Falls, Pennsylvania pose while cutting wood to fuel their steamboat, 1898. Every day crews battled rain, heat, and mosquitos to cut enough to feed engine boilers. Alaska State Library, Claude Hobart Collection (P425-6-7).



Men from the Illinois group gather at the store and post office in the tiny outpost of Koyukuk six miles downstream from the mouth of the Koyukuk River, August 8, 1898. This was their last opportunity to buy supplies and send letters home. Anchorage Museum, Jasper N. Wyman Collection (B1989.24.69).

City”—though the men were still living in tents and they had not yet completed their sawmill or the log building they intended to use as a store.³⁸ Not wanting to delay, the Illinois group quickly set out for their ultimate goal about twenty miles farther north, the Alatna River, which at the time was called the Allenkaket. In a letter, Wyman shows he is aware of being part of a much larger phenomenon and explains that his group planned to move beyond the gold-seeking hordes:

We expect to go up the Allenkaket River. There is not many people up above there, perhaps 300 or 400, but from the reports we get all the time, I expect thousands of people

in here this winter. They are waiting at Dawson, Minook and other places along the Yukon till it freezes up, then they will come in over the trail with sleds and dog teams. There will undoubtedly be a big rush for this place.³⁹

As Wyman soon found, the Alatna was even more narrow and crooked than the Koyukuk, and it presented many of the same obstacles. It took the *Illinois* five days to travel roughly forty miles up the river, and much of that was accomplished by pulling the heavy steamer through narrow channels with ropes. On more than one occasion they were forced to unload all of their cargo onto the



beach so that the vessel was light enough to squeeze through rapids, and even then most of the cargo was left in place to be fetched later. The *Beaver* was also headed for the Alatna, and her captain, Herman Carpenter, described the route: “This last part of the trip was the hardest of all, as the river was nothing but a succession of rapids, which were almost water-falls, and was full of snags and boulders, which, if ever struck, would have driven a hole through our boat.”⁴⁰

While the steamboats arrived on the Alatna, local Koyukon Athabascans watched

from their fishing camps along the lower half of the river. The families were ready to begin their annual harvest of whitefish, a salmon-like fish that migrates north to spawn, and Captain James D. Winchester of Lynn, Massachusetts described the scene as the temperatures dropped but the rivers and creeks had not yet frozen:

There were many Indian villages along the Allenkaket [Alatna], for there was good fishing. We saw two canoes with squaws setting a net, and

Stampederers from the *Alaska Union* stop to pan for signs of gold along the Koyukuk River, 1898. The men who owned the 110-foot steamboat would later establish the mining camp of Union City on the river's South Fork. University of Alaska Fairbanks Archives, Charles Harris Papers (1967-71-25).

AN INUPIAQ MAN'S MEMORY OF KOYUKUK STAMPEDERS

Few accounts exist of how Alaska Native people viewed the gold rush phenomenon at the time it was happening. However, in 1931, when the wilderness advocate Bob Marshall was living in the town of Wiseman, he recorded the recollections of his friend Big Charlie Suckiks, a Kobuk River Inupiaq man who described his first encounters with stampeders. In 1898, when Suckiks was sixteen, he and his father set out for the Koyukuk region on a hunting trip and soon found something unexpected:

First white man I ever saw down below Bettles, '98. Me and old man come over from Kobuk down head of John River. We see white thing like smoke against hill, and we go see what it is. Pretty soon we see man, look different any man I ever see. He say: 'Hello!' I don't even savvy hello. He give me tobacco, and I smoke that fine. Pretty soon he motion like this (making beckoning motion). Then me and old man follow. Then he walk a little ways and motion again, and we follow some more. Pretty soon I says to old man: 'Maybe he want us to go with him.'

Then we follow him, and pretty soon we see big boat in slough. We never see anything like that, white smoke coming out and everything, and we scared. But he go on board over gangplank, and pretty soon he go down in cabin, and come out with tobacco, and throw it at us. We know that, and when he motion some more we think he all right, so we come over gangplank. Then he take us down to cabin and make motion, and long time we no savvy nothing. But then old man says to me: 'Maybe he wants us to fetch him caribou skins, he give us tobacco.'

Then he take us to other cabin, and we set down at table. I never see him table before. Funny thing. Then man come in and bring all sort of grub, set him on table. I know nothing about that sort of grub. I don't know nothing about use him fork, I no savvy plate. I no know which way to hold knife and fork. Pretty soon I eat bread and tea, I know that all right. Pretty soon white man put something yellow on bread [mustard?]. Pretty soon I swallow it, pretty soon it do down just like strong whiskey. I feel it go all the way down to stomach, it burn like fire in stomach. My papa all scared, he try doctor me up this way with hands, blow on me. Pretty soon I all better.

Stay four days, pretty soon I like white man's gun. He show me bullets, 30-30, and I think he too small to kill anything with. I think his gun bum, no good for nothing. Us fellows no savvy white language for long time. Pretty soon we find native boy, he savvy quickly, he tell us a few words. Then we know few words, pretty soon we learn real quick.

—excerpt from a letter by Bob Marshall, January 27, 1931



in five or ten minutes it was taken up and landed full of fish. They had a heap of fish on shore that froze as soon as landed and were sorted out—some for the dogs and others put in the cache. An old Indian sat on the shore smoking his pipe and watching the squaws catch the fish.

Later he described passing the *Jennie M.*, which was stuck on a sand bar about sixty miles below an Alatna tributary called Help-Me-Jack Creek, and noted, “Next we met a tall Indian standing on a rock with a long yellow blanket on his shoulders and a pipe made of a brass cartridge in his mouth—a noble specimen of the Red Man. His hand

was extended for toll and one of the Sirenes [men from the steamboat *Sirene*] presented him with a hand of tobacco which seemed to please him very much.”⁴¹ Winchester took the time to sketch this scene of the Koyukon man with the yellow blanket and the stampedeers towing their river scow upstream with hand lines to include with the published version of his account.

By August 28 the *Illinois* could go no farther because the Alatna was simply too shallow. The crew anchored the steamboat in a protected slough just behind another vessel, the *North Star*, and from this point on Wyman and the others would transport their supplies using flat-bottomed skiffs that they propelled by pulling with ropes over

When the *Illinois* reached Arctic City, members of the Galesburg-Alaska Mining & Developing Company mingled with stampedeers from Boston who were building a log store and sawmill, August 21, 1898. This new settlement took shape near the site of a trading post by the same name established by Gordon Bettles five years earlier. Anchorage Museum, Jasper N. Wyman Collection (B1989.24.75).



As the *Illinois* pushed up the Alatna River (then called the Allenkaket), the water grew shallower and the crew was forced to unload cargo on sandbars to lighten the load, August 26, 1898. The company's two black Labrador retrievers can be seen stretching their legs. Anchorage Museum, Jasper N. Wyman Collection (B1989.24.79).

their shoulders while wading in the frigid water. For Wyman the work was both painful and exhilarating:

I cannot sleep very soundly any time; my mind is continually on the advancement of our party. I have worked in water to my waist many times and it is cold as ice; my hands are continually in water and sand, pulling ropes to get off from bars and keep off from them, till they are now all cracked and worn through so they are continually bleeding, but still I push ahead and feel encouraged for such is life in Alaska.⁴²

In spite of the daily grind, Wyman was making friends among the *Beaver* party (he called them “an exceptionally fine class of men”) and he took time to trade with Koyukon people living along the Alatna River. At one point he bartered six pounds of tobacco, two pipes and some denim goods for a small skiff; he also gave one dollar, one pipe, and three yards of Calico cloth for a pair of snowshoes. In addition to the *Illinois*, the *North Star*, the *Jennie M.*, the *Sirene*, and the *Beaver*, three more steamboats were pushing up the Alatna—the *Eclipse*, *Argo*, and *Sunflower*—and all eight groups faced the same task. Instead of prospecting for gold, a desire that burned in the minds of each stamper, they needed to protect themselves from the cold



that everyone knew would arrive soon. And Wyman declared, “We will now have to prepare for winter and scatter over the country.”⁴³

Since leaving home more than four months earlier, the Illinoisans had been traveling under trying circumstances and through unfamiliar territory and the voyage had taken its toll on the men and women of the group. Already Wyman and others were thinking of abandoning the Galesburg company, and Wyman’s letters reflected his frustration with the work ethic of certain members and his belief that the company would not last long:

I am still determined to do for myself. I think the boys, most of them, will do the same as I am and I think the Company will split all up. We will each get an equal 1/25 of everything anyhow, even if we don’t stay with the Company. . . . I promise you this, I won’t work like a dog for some lazy cusses that are in the party to reap the benefit, Oh! No!⁴⁴

Three members of the company had already left with their share of the provisions, and Wyman too declared he had had enough

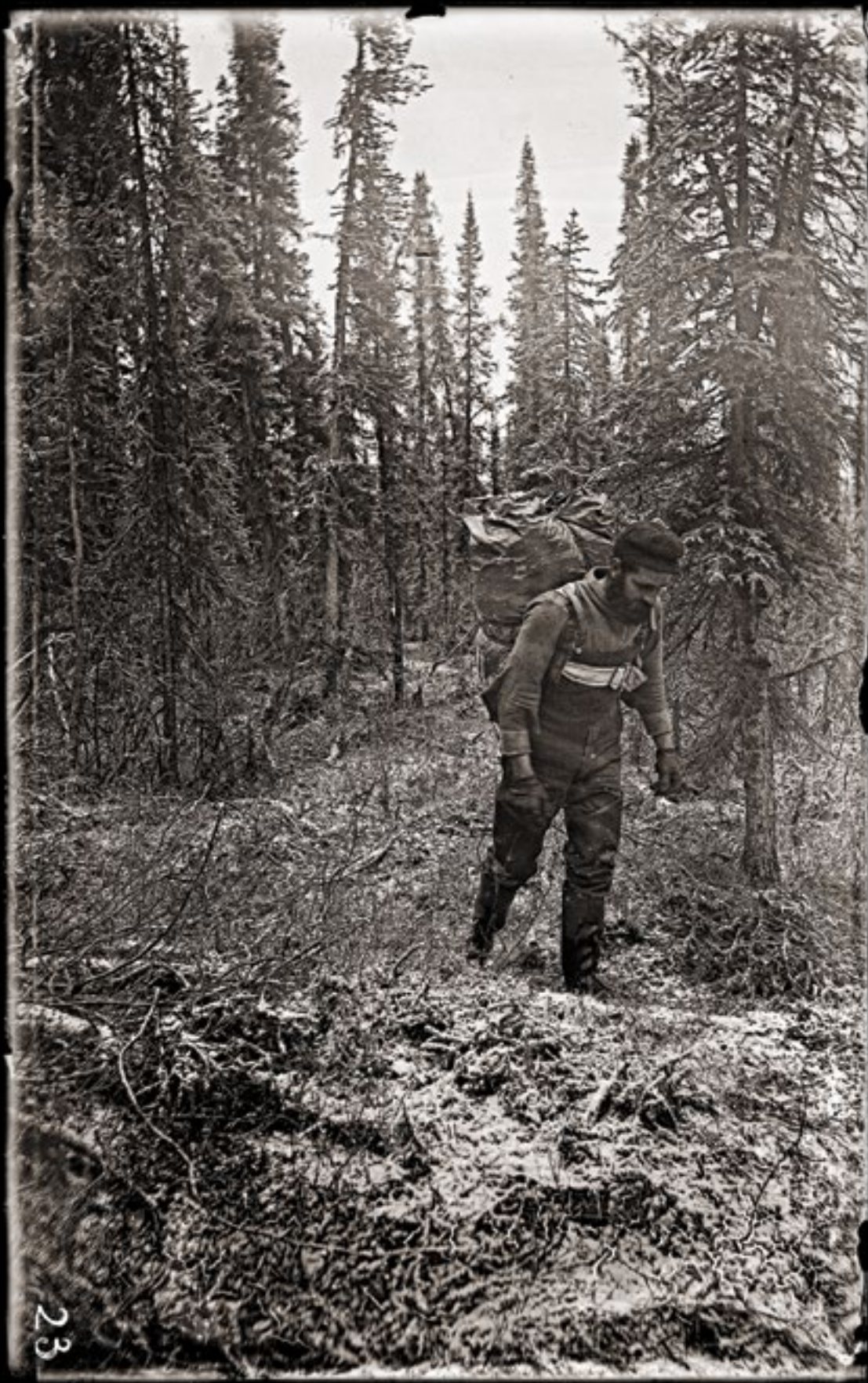
Koyukon Athabascan women pull alongside the steamer Jennie M. which was carrying stampeders from Philadelphia, 1898. Their canoes are loaded with nets and other material for establishing a fishing camp. University of Alaska Fairbanks Archives, Alaska Historical Society Photograph Collection (1976-41-51).



Stampeders "lining" a skiff through shallows on Help-Me-Jack Creek using ropes and harnesses, October 11, 1898. The men complained about sore muscles and losing feeling in their legs because of the frigid water. Anchorage Museum, Jasper N. Wyman Collection (B1989.24.81).

and would strike out on his own. However, his plans were thwarted when he tried to return to Arctic City with his supplies in a skiff and could only manage on his own for about four miles before having to strike camp. And when he returned to the newly built Illinois group headquarters to say goodbye to his friend Norman Aldrich (who had not been around when Wyman left), his comrades persuaded him to to abandon his plans. As Wyman explained in his diary, "The boys have begged me to stay with the Co. They

seem to want me not to go and above all it is hard for me to part with my old pard, Mr. Aldrich, for he has been a true friend to me."⁴⁵ Their journey north had been hard going and there was more adversity ahead. In order to survive they would need to work together. Soon Wyman volunteered to launch the Illinois party's first prospecting expedition while the rest of the men turned their efforts to a project of absolute necessity—building cabins to survive their first winter above the Arctic Circle.



Jasper Wyman hauling supplies in a backpack made from a tarpaulin and rope, October 1898. Anchorage Museum, Jasper N. Wyman Collection (B1989.24.80).

ENDNOTES

¹ *Seattle Times*, July 23, 1897. In the early days of the Klondike rush the spelling of the name varied, including Clondyke and Klondyke. The name is derived from the Han Athabaskan name for the river—Tr'ondëk—which means “hammerstone,” a tool used to pound stakes when setting salmon nets in the river.

² See, Chris Allan, “Gold Rush Ice Train: The Curious History of George Glover’s Invention and the U.S. Government’s Klondike Relief Expedition,” *Alaska History* 30 (Spring 2015), 1-34.

³ “Klondicitis: People of the Middle West Feverish,” *Los Angeles Times*, February 7, 1898, 1.

⁴ *Leslie’s Weekly*, August 12, 1897, 132; *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, January 21, 1898, 1.

⁵ “Has Little Yukon Gold on Board,” *San Francisco Call*, October 30, 1897, 3; “Capt. Phil Ray Here,” *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, April 17, 1898, 10.

⁶ “Mail Carrier Talks,” *Alaskan* [Sitka], August 14, 1897, 2.

⁷ “Journey from Seattle to Dawson and Return,” *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, April 3, 1898, 13-14. See also, “The Klondike Spreading,” *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, December 8, 1897, 4.

⁸ “Another Big Strike,” *Times* [Washington, D.C.], November 8, 1897, 3; “Equals Klondike,” *Boston Journal*, November 8, 1897, 3.

⁹ “A Peculiar Craft,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 20, 1898, 8.

¹⁰ Aurlette Ingman, “Gold Dust,” (1938), 7-9, based on Jasper N. Wyman’s diary, Anchorage Museum, Wyman Collection.

¹¹ Jasper N. Wyman diary, May 1, 1898, Anchorage Museum, Wyman Collection.

¹² John M. Hewitt, *The Alaska Vagabond, Doctor Skookum: Memories of an Adventurous Life* (New York: Exposition Press, 1953), 28.

¹³ Ingman, “Gold Dust,” 9; Jasper N. Wyman, *Journey to the Koyukuk: The Photos of J.N. Wyman, 1898-1899* (Missoula, MT: Pictorials Histories Publishing Co., 1988), 8.

¹⁴ Ingman, “Gold Dust,” 8-9.

¹⁵ Wyman diary, May 19, 1898.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Wyman diary, May 20, 1898.

¹⁸ Wyman diary, June 1-5, 1898.

¹⁹ Wyman diary, June 7, 1898.

²⁰ Wyman diary, June 15, 1898. The first ship to reach St. Michael in 1898 was the schooner *Hattie I. Phillips* from Gloucester, Massachusetts that came around Cape Horn to reach San Francisco where it was quickly outfitted to take stampedeers to Alaska. “Fitted for Alaska,” *Lewiston Evening Journal*, April 8, 1898, 2.

²¹ See University of Washington Libraries, Special Collections, Stuart Forbes Photograph Collection (40).

²² “Warnings to Klondikers,” *San Francisco Call*, March 26, 1898, 6. Twenty-six passengers from the *Jane Gray* escaped drowning by boarding skiffs and making their way to land at Vancouver Island. For more about this dramatic episode in Seattle’s gold rush history, see Michelle Merritt, *The Jane Gray: The Italian Prince and the Shipwreck That Forever Changed the History of Seattle* (self-published, 2013).

²³ Wyman diary, June 15-17, 1898.

²⁴ Hewitt, *Alaska Vagabond*, 52.

²⁵ Claus Rodine, letter to his wife from St. Michael, June 27, 1898, Alaska State Library, Papers of Claus Rodine (MS-134).

²⁶ Wyman, letter to his family from St. Michael, June 26, 1898, Anchorage Museum, Wyman Collection.

²⁷ Wyman letter, July 11, 1898.

²⁸ Wyman letter, June 29, 1898.

²⁹ “Much Gold on Tanana Creek,” *San Francisco Call*, February 12, 1898, 4; “Bring Gold from Dawson,” *San Francisco Call*, April 19, 1898, 4.

³⁰ Wyman diary, July 11, 1898; Wyman letter, July 11, 1898.

³¹ Claus Rodine, letter to his wife from mouth of Koyukuk River, August 8, 1898. See also, Thomas G. Youngs, letter describing decision to reject the Tanana River for the Koyukuk, July 19, 1898, from transcription by Youngs family and shared with author by George Lounsbury.

³² Rodine letter, August 8, 1898.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Wyman diary, July 24-30, 1898; Rodine letter, August 8, 1898.

³⁵ Wyman diary, July 24, 1898.

³⁶ Wyman letter, August 7, 1898.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ “Gold on the Koyukuk,” *New York Times*, September 17, 1898, 12.

³⁹ Wyman letter, August 20, 1898.

⁴⁰ Herman Carpenter, *Three Years in Alaska* (Philadelphia: Howard Company, 1901), 52.

⁴¹ James D. Winchester, *Capt. J.D. Winchester’s Experience on a Voyage from Lynn, Massachusetts, to San Francisco, Cal., and to the Alaskan Gold Fields* (Newcomb & Gauss, 1900), 194.

⁴² Wyman diary, August 27, 1898.

⁴³ Wyman diary, August 27-28, 1898.

⁴⁴ Wyman diary, August 20, 1898.

⁴⁵ Wyman diary, September 1, 1898; Wyman letter, September 9, 1898.

⁴⁶ “Prospects Are Good on the American Side,” *San Francisco Call*, November 4, 1898, 12.

⁴⁷ “Bound for Koyukuk River,” *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, June 6, 1899, 6.



Along the winter road between Bettles and the Dalton Highway, 2014. Courtesy of Mike Spindler, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service.

Chapter 3: Darkness and Danger—Koyukuk Stampedeers Prepare for Winter

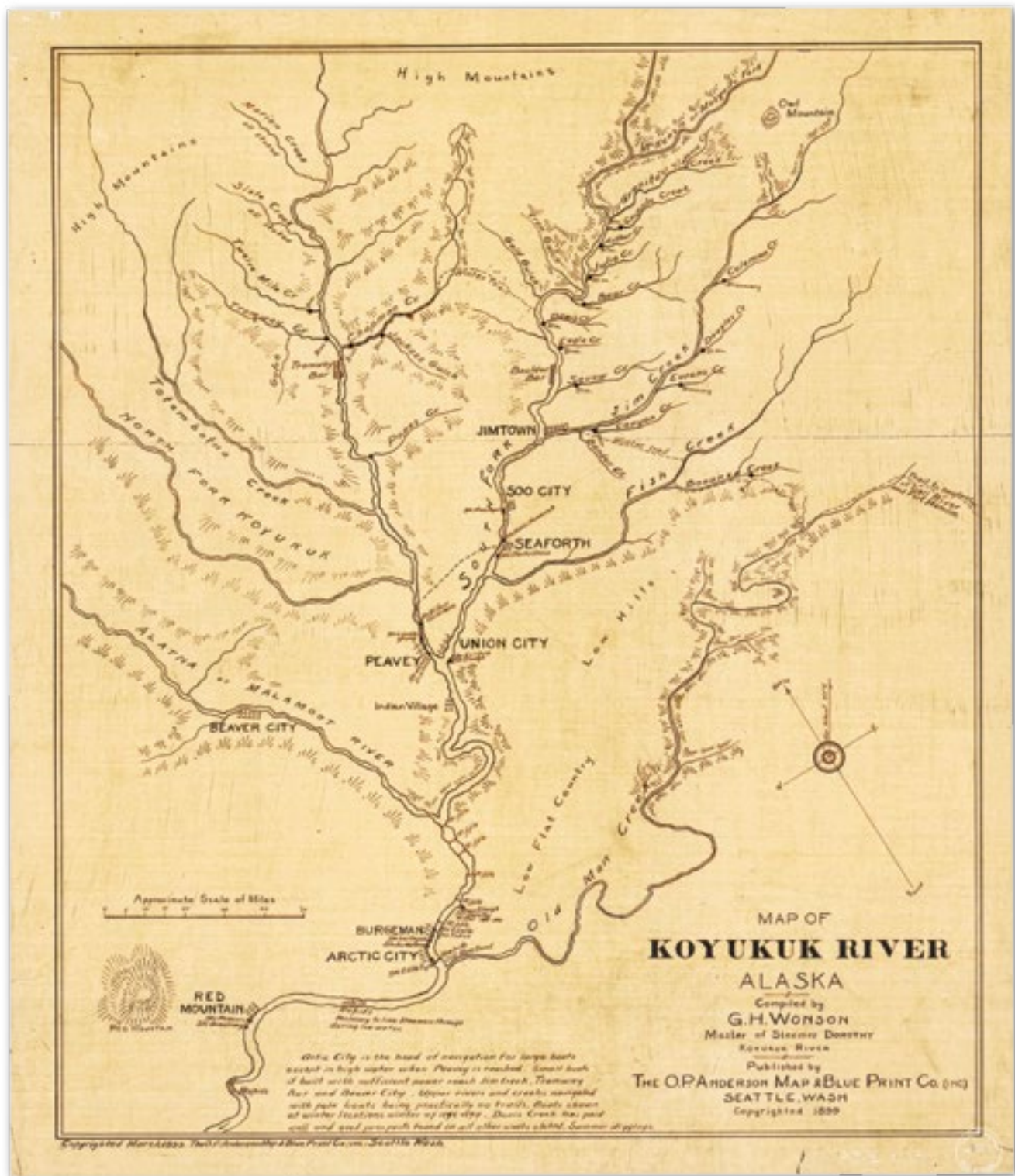
Then Satan or somebody pulled one of those dangerous tricks out of the bag—the kind that has given the Koyukuk a very bad name. A sudden freeze occurred almost overnight, and sixty-eight steamers were frozen in solid for the long cold winter.

—Gordon C. Bettles

By the beginning of September 1898, not only had the *Illinois* arrived but an entire flotilla of steamboats had begun landing at various points on the upper Koyukuk. The precise number is hard to determine, but Gordon Bettles counted sixty-eight vessels and other eye-witnesses reported much the same. Most of the steamboats were the type, like the *Illinois*, that were built in Seattle or San Francisco and “knocked-down” for the voyage to Alaska. Others were small enough to be shipped to Alaska fully built and strapped to the deck of a much larger vessel. Once the northbound fleet left St. Michael, stories appeared in the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and other newspapers announcing that two thousand people were in Koyukuk country and naming the states represented by mining companies—Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, Illinois, California, New York, Iowa, and others.¹ Wherever they were from, the gold-seekers all faced the same reality—at some point above and below the Arctic Circle, when shallow water prevented the steamboats from going any farther, the stampedeers would be forced to abandon the relative security of their vessels, unload their supplies on the

shore, and face the cold which would make leaving difficult or impossible.

In some cases, steamboats for hire were able to turn around and sail back to the Yukon River before winter arrived and the river iced over, but most of the ships were owned and operated by the miners themselves and leaving was not an option. Therefore, wherever they landed, the mining companies founded their own “cities” in which to spend the winter. These settlements were little more than clearings in the woods with a few tents and tiny log cabins and a steamboat maneuvered onto logs to protect it from crushing ice. For example, when the *Alaska Union* stopped at the Koyukuk’s South Fork, the men named the place Union City. The crews aboard the steamers *Messenger* and *Katie Hemrich* belonged to the Yukon Gold Dredge Company of Sioux City, Iowa, and they founded two camps—Seaforth and Soo City—just a few miles apart from each other along the South Fork. Farther north, on the confluence of the South Fork and Jim River, prospectors from Iowa aboard the steamboat *Little Jim* established a camp they called Jimtown. And south of the Arctic Circle near Red Mountain, the steamboat *Research*, owned by the Klondyke Research



Captain George Wonson of Gloucester, Massachusetts created this map in 1899 to show where certain steamboats stopped and where mining camps formed on the upper Koyukuk. It was meant to advertise the gold fields, but its geographical errors could also confuse users. Library of Congress.

Syndicate of Liverpool, England, and the *D. Armstrong* belonging to the St. Mary's Mining & Milling Company of Ohio both stopped for the winter and established a camp called Mountain City or Red Mountain.

Seemingly overnight an impromptu community was taking shape along the Koyukuk and its northern branches, a society of strangers who, in a frenzy, were building homes, meeting their neighbors (both other stampeders and Alaska Natives) and preparing to search the region for gold. And it did not take long for entrepreneurs to appear offering to supply the gold-seekers with whatever they might lack. At the invitation of the *Edith M. Kyle* group, the Alaskan Exploration Company opened a store at Arctic City, while fifty miles to the north, just above the Arctic Circle, the North American Trading & Transportation Company established the trading post of Peavy on a protected slough a short distance from the Koyukuk.² Of course, Gordon Bettles, that long-time promoter of the Koyukuk and co-founder of the original Arctic City, was not far behind.

Yet when he arrived on the upper Koyukuk aboard the Alaska Commercial Company's steamboat *Yukon*, Bettles found that Arctic City had been usurped by the *Edith M. Kyle* group and that townsite lots were already being sold and electric lights were strung in the trees. Furthermore, the citizens of this upstart settlement all gathered on the bank when the *Yukon* approached to witness Bettles' reaction when informed he would have to pay wharfage fees and purchase a warehouse site if he wanted to set up shop. To the consternation of the crowd, Bettles did not even pause but coolly proceeded about five miles further upstream where he staked off his own townsite and called the place Bergman in honor of the captain of the *Yukon*, James Bergman. The new trading post, under the management of Bettles and

Charles and Frank Pickarts, flourished. A dozen steamboats wintered there, roughly 200 people moved in, and it soon became an important center of commercial activity for the entire upper Koyukuk.³

Trading posts like Bergman were intended as little more than a store, perhaps with a saloon at the back, but the North American Trading & Transportation Company had bigger plans for the hamlet of Peavy. Named for a lawyer from Portsmouth, Maine described as "a man of sterling good character," the outpost 300 miles up the Koyukuk soon had a schoolhouse and a church and two ministers who gave regular sermons (due to a lack of buildings, the second minister used the steamboat *Lavelle Young* as a chapel).⁴ In addition, the residents formed an ambitious civic organization called the Peavy Club. As James Deitrick, a veteran of both the Klondike and the Koyukuk stampedes, explained,

The Peavy Club, organized by the citizens of that hustling camp, has, as its ultimate view, the establishment of a station at the North Pole. The members figured it out that it is about as easy to make stations and reach the pole with safety from Peavy, which is supposed to be about 700 miles distant, as from Franz Josef Land, and tourists who wish to view the pole can do so via this enterprising camp.⁵

This unconventional strategy for promoting their new town ignored the 500-mile-long Brooks Range and the vast Arctic Slope separating Peavy from the Arctic Ocean, but the idea no doubt led to lively late-night planning sessions. For a time Peavy was the largest town on the Koyukuk, and the region's first land recorder, James Austin, was stationed there. His job was to document new mining



Koyukuk stampeder camp while crossing from the Dall River to the Kanuti and the Koyukuk, 1898. Horses were not common so far north, but this group has one (blurred, on right). University of Washington Digital Collections, Eric A. Hegg Photographs (1136).

claims, to settle claim-jumping disputes, and to appoint deputies to oversee the other major mining camps.⁶

Through the months of September and October the population of the upper Koyukuk was in flux. Temperatures were dropping quickly, and many stampeder were getting “cold feet” and deciding to flee the area. Gordon Bettles estimated that fully half of the population of the camps decided to leave, often going out in small boats or on overland trails. As he explained, “Many of the eastern men, unused to the hardships incident to a trip of the character, through a practically unknown region, and discouraged by the desolate appearance of the country, at once

abandoned the enterprise and returned to the States before winter should overtake them.”⁷ Even so, the gold-seeking population of the Koyukuk remained roughly the same because even as the timid were leaving, new gold-seekers were arriving on overland trails from trading stations near the Tanana River mouth, from the gold camp at Rampart, and from the trading post of Fort Hamlin.⁸

For the stampeder who came and stayed, it was not long before they realized how dangerous a Far North adventure could be. The first fatality occurred on September 27 when the general manager of the Alaska Union Mining Company, John G. Tait, was canoeing with four members of his group

along the Koyukuk's South Fork and collided with a Koyukuk fish trap fixed in the middle of the stream. The occupants of the boat were thrown into the water, and Tait managed to grasp the overturned hull but became exhausted and sank despite the efforts of his companions to pull him into shallow water. By that date, portions of the river were frozen over, and the body floated under a stretch of ice and disappeared. The newspapers reported that Tait was born in Scotland and had a wife and young son in Chicago where he was a prominent dealer in building stone. Days later his body was discovered near Union City by two local Koyukuk men and brought there for burial.⁹

Within a day of Tait's death, a party of ten stampeders left the Yukon River mining camp of Rampart guided by Koyukuk veteran and Tramway Bar discoverer Johnny Folger. Described in the newspapers as "Eastern tenderfoots," the group was lightly equipped to travel quickly and after three days on the trail a snow storm came up as they were nearing the mountains separating the Yukon River and the Koyukuk. Folger warned the men it was time to turn back and that the journey was not worth their lives, but only three decided to return. The others demanded that Folger guide them on. Two days later they faced another blizzard and the mercury dropped below zero. Soon their reserves of food were gone and, as the *Yukon Press* explained,

The on-movers bravely climbed divide after divide, wallowing in [tussock mounds] on the flats, hip-deep hard snow on the divides. In ten days' time, they were entirely lost and for two weeks wandered about almost at random, most of the time without food, except that furnished by Mr. [Frank] Moses' St. Bernard dog. At the end of a fortnight, when



Johnny Folger was a Koyukuk pioneer who arrived in Alaska in 1882, discovered gold on Tramway Bar in 1894, and guided less experienced people to the Koyukuk diggings in 1898. University of Alaska Fairbanks Archives, Fabian Carey Collection (1975-209-31).

hope was entirely gone, and the last agonies of starvation were consuming them, a hut was reached in which Folger found a saw and stove which he recognized as having been sold to an Indian on Old Man Creek.¹⁰

Folger knew that Old Man Creek, or Kanuti River, led directly to the Koyukuk, and this clue was enough to lead him in the direction of Arctic City. When the group arrived they were too weak to climb the short embankment to the town, but the residents took them in and nursed them back to health.¹¹



One of several log cabins built by members of the Galesburg-Alaska Mining & Developing Company in the Alatna River mining camp they called West Beaver, October 13, 1898. This example was larger than most at 16 x 20 feet. Anchorage Museum, Jasper N. Wyman Collection (B1989.24.82).

Meanwhile, Jasper Wyman and his companions had placed the *Illinois* on logs that would protect the vessel from the worst ice pressure and allow it to break free more easily in the spring. Then they moved farther up the Alatna River to find suitable locations to build cabins. Freezing nights and a fresh blanket of snow reminded everyone that cabin-building was an urgent matter. Wyman's friends from Beaver Falls had already begun building a camp they named Beaver City near the mouth of a tributary called Help-Me-Jack Creek, and travelers knew they had arrived because of a "starry banner flying from a high pole" that marked the spot to land boats.¹² This camp would eventually feature twenty cabins and be the metropolis of the Alatna. About twenty-five miles far-

ther upriver, adjacent to Iniakuk Lake, the Cleveland-Alaska Mining & Milling Company from the steamer *Argo* constructed at least five cabins and called their camp Rapid City. The Illinois group chose to build their camp a short distance from Beaver City and called their settlement West Beaver, though members also built cabins wherever their prospecting strategy dictated.

After returning from a brief prospecting trip, Wyman and his friend Andy Kuhne of the *Beaver* party arrived in West Beaver in time to help the Illinois men build a rough 16 x 20 foot log cabin. With axes and saws men cut spruce logs and notched them at the ends to lock the corners of the structure. In between each log they placed sphagnum moss as chinking and insulation. As one stamper



A stamper on laundry duty with cabin-builders in the background, 1898. Many men in the Koyukuk were unaccustomed to washing clothes and cooking for themselves, but they learned quickly. Alaska State Library, Claude Hobart Collection (P425-6-26).

explained, the rectangular blocks of moss were “skinned from the surface of the frozen ground with a spade.” Wyman also described the hasty construction process in his diary:

The way the cabins here are built is that the logs are laid up with plenty of sod or moss between them so as to make it air tight. The roof is covered with moss and dirt and the floors are made of poles with the tops hewed off and the cracks corked with moss. Paper or cloth windows if you have no glass.¹³

The roofs of these cabins were flat—no attempt was made to build peaked roofs because the structures were only intended to last one winter and therefore did not need to shed melting snow and rain in the spring.

The Illinois group had the foresight to bring sets of framed windows, but some other mining companies were less well equipped. The log cabins were small, many only 12 x 12 feet, offering just enough room to shelter three or four men, and they were furnished with the basics: a handmade table, chairs, bunks, shelves and pegs, and a woodstove. The men slept side by side in elevated bunks fashioned from logs with spruce poles in place of mattress springs. The bed poles were covered with spruce boughs and dry grasses, and the men tried to beat the cold under fur robes and wool blankets or in canvas sleeping bags.¹⁴

Members of the Illinois group moved into the cabin Wyman called their “Humble Home” on October 8, but the company would remain spread out along the Alatna River with one cabin at Beaver City, two at

Norman Aldrich from Illinois (right) and another man cut log rounds with a whipsaw and split them to fit into their cabin's woodstove, 1898. Alaska State Library, Claude Hobart Collection (P425-6-4).



West Beaver, and cabins on both Beaver Creek and Rocky Bottom Creek. In all there were about 350 people living along this river corridor, and life very soon settled into a routine. From time to time, teams went out prospecting with backpacks or pulling heavy sleds while their fellows did chores around the camps, wrote letters home, and visited with neighbors. One task—hand cutting lumber—was so arduous that nearly every stamper who put pen to paper mentioned the backbreaking toil. Because lumber from the outside world was in short supply, Wyman and the others needed to cut logs using an extra-long, two-man “whipsaw” to make shelves, doors, and table-tops. Wyman got his first taste of whipsawing in mid-October when the temperatures had dropped to near zero and the river was frozen over. He explained,

I have heard much talk about whipsawing in this country, but today I have been fully initiated. Myself and two of the other boys have been sawing steady all day and have only sawed three small logs, 12 feet long. The logs are put up on a frame 6 or 7 feet high and one man works on the top and the other below. I have been on top all day and I know from the way I feel this evening that I will be so stiff in the morning that I won't be able to get up.¹⁵

On one occasion Wyman stopped in at Beaver City where the residents were holding an old-fashioned musical performance. In his diary he wrote, “Most of the boys gathered into one tent and we had quite a revival of singing and music [with] violins and guitar



and other pieces. . . . It really made one think of home again when we would all join in the chorus of some favorite hymn.”¹⁶ Female stampeders were exceedingly rare in Koyukuk country, and there were only two women at Beaver City and two more downstream where the *Illinois* was frozen in the ice. Mrs. Campbell and her sister Josie Campbell were very popular among the men, who built them a larger cabin and invited them to all social functions. Wyman wrote with admiration about how these members of stamper society adapted to their new surroundings:

The two ladies have been great heroes, therefore the people have a good feeling toward them. They dressed up in men’s clothes and

helped pull and pole their boats and provisions up the river a distance of 100 miles. Waded in water with their rubber boots on and the rope over their shoulders same as their husband and parent [sic]. They are fine women. . . . They are the only women in camp or up in this part of the country.¹⁷

The first collective act of the Alatna River gold-seekers (and in camps throughout the upper Koyukuk) was to establish the laws that would govern daily life in the area. In the absence of any official authority, this was accomplished by calling a “miners’ committee meeting.” The meeting was held at Beaver City on October 10, and all of the stampeders

Whipsawing logs into lumber was backbreaking labor and worse for the man below who dealt with sawdust falling in his face, but it was necessary on the Koyukuk River where the stampeders needed planks to build doors, tables, and benches, October 14, 1898. Anchorage Museum, Jasper N. Wyman Collection (B1989.24.87).

SIDENOTE 5:

FRONTIER JUSTICE AND THE MINERS' MEETING

Law and order in the country has been enforced by a committee of miners, and with the exception of one shooting and cutting case last winter, it has been quiet and orderly.

—Canadian policeman Charles Constantine at Fortymile, 1894

Gold-seekers along the Yukon River brought with them a form of conflict resolution born in earlier Rocky Mountain gold districts—the miners' committee meeting. In the absence of police or courts, these meetings enforced a highly democratic and largely unwritten form of frontier justice that included fines, whipping, banishment, or even death by hanging. Any prospector could call a meeting simply by posting a notice, and then a judge would be elected and the congregated miners would act as jury. Both sides of a dispute could produce witnesses and state their cases, and the verdict was decided by a show of hands. As interior Alaska's first judge, James Wickersham, noted when he arrived, the meetings offered "no notice of appeal, no bill of exceptions, no stay of execution."

For the crimes of assault or theft, exile was the most common punishment (with the threat of death if the perpetrator returned), but more mundane disputes could also be resolved by a vote of the majority. However, the aggrieved could not always be confident of a favorable outcome—as the historian Pierre Berton explained, frivolous complaints were often rejected and the plaintiff might be "fined twenty dollars by the miners for daring to call one [meeting] at all, and the sum was spent immediately on drinks." The arrival of Canada's North West Mounted Police brought an end to miners' committees in the Klondike, but in Alaska's hinterlands the practice remained a necessity.

Miners gather for a meeting at Beaver City to decide on local laws and mining regulations, October 10, 1898. Alaska State Library, Claude Hobart Collection (P425-6-23).



who were not out prospecting arrived to discuss the most pressing issues of law and local practice. Captain James D. Winchester was on hand and described the scene:

The meeting was held in a large double shack, and there we made the miners' laws for the city and for staking out claims. A claim was to cover five hundred square feet, and a man could take only one claim on a creek. Staking by power of attorney was prohibited. . . . The town was to be laid out in house lots, and each man that was located at the present time would share in an equal division of these lots. I believe there were about forty lots apiece . . . and there we had our city.¹⁸

In addition, the delegates approved a \$1.50 fee for recording a claim and determined that working on a claim for ten successive days would equal the annual \$100 worth of labor needed to maintain its legal status. Jasper Wyman brought up the issue of firewood by proposing that no timber could be claimed until it had been felled and cut to length, thus preventing disputes should one group try to claim an entire section of forest.¹⁹ One of the most contentious issues at this and future miners' meetings was the problem of gratuitous claim-staking—the process by which a stamperder staked claims for family members, friends, and anyone else who expressed interest using a transferred power-of-attorney. The miner Donald A. McKenzie, who in later years became the Koyukuk's mining commissioner, expressed his frustration and explained that although the gathered gold-seekers prohibited the practice, it persisted for some time after the meeting:

The miners—no, I cannot call them by that name—the grabbers started

out with hatchet and pencil and staked nearly every creek and gulch within reach. There was a local law made that staking by power of attorney could not be allowed, but some of the men who attended the meeting and helped make this law, immediately started out and staked for all their friends that were in the country. This caused much dissatisfaction and these locations were declared illegal and have not been recognized.²⁰

He called the perpetrators “hatchet and pencil men” because they used a hatchet to mark a tree at the corner of a mining claim and a pencil to record the claim in the log books at the land recorder's office. This practice was a problem in most of Alaska's gold mining areas because many of the claim-holders hoped that they would never have to turn a shovel—instead they would make a profit by selling the claims to others who believed the ground concealed a fortune.

By early November the sun could be seen only a few hours in the middle of the day and the temperatures were consistently near zero. The time had come to start mining the claims the stampeders had been staking since they arrived. As James Winchester explained, the cold was essential to drift mining, which involved digging straight down and then horizontally to follow a ribbon of gold-bearing gravel, because all of that effort could be lost in a moment if the shaft flooded when it reached the water table. “Everybody now was up in the creeks putting up shacks and getting ready to work their claims,” he wrote, “which could not be done until the ground froze down to bed rock, so that when they came to dig, the hole would not fill up with water.”²¹ In order to sink a shaft it was necessary to build wood fires to thaw the frozen ground. The miners typically built two fires a day and

When Frank McGillis and Aggie Dalton decided to get married they were camped at the mouth of the Dall River and preparing to push on to the Koyukuk diggings. Lacking both priest and magistrate, they started the long overland journey and soon encountered a mail carrier known as "Windy Jim" Dodson who recommended they seek out the miner "French Joe" Durant to help them with the ceremony. As Dodson recounted for the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, the wedding took place on November 10, 1898 and relied on frontier improvisation:

They were soon at Durant's place. I went with them as guide and witness. The spot was on a wide, mountainous slope, by the side of a lake, and under the shelter of a friendly tree whose evergreen branches defied the chill November winds. Durant gladly agreed to perform the pleasant task, but as he had no law form or church rituals at hand he devised a form of his own and put it into rude rhyme...

The bride repeated the following:

*Ten miles from the Yukon, on the banks of this lake,
For a partner to Koyukuk, McGillis I take;
We have no preacher, we have no ring,
It makes no difference, it's all the same thing.*

The groom's part was as follows:

I swear by my gee-pole under this tree,
A devoted husband to Aggie I always will be;
I'll love and protect her, this maiden so frail,
From those sour-dough stiffs on the Koyukuk trail.*

Durant then tied the knot as follows:

*For two dollars apiece, in Chechaco money,
I unite this couple in matrimony;
He be a rancher and she be a teacher,
I do up the job just as well as a preacher.*

* A gee pole is a sturdy stick traditionally attached to the right side (the "gee" side) of a heavy sled to help the driver with steering and stability.

shoveled out the thawed gravel until they eventually reached bedrock.

From the beginning the results were disappointing. Claus Rodine of the Illinois group described digging seven prospecting holes and finding only tiny particles called “colors”:

We found gold colors in going down at different depths but nothing else and nothing on bedrock. We panned every day [and] every evening we would light a fire and chuck in a half cord of wood almost. It would burn until morning when we would go and clean up or dig out from one to two feet of gravel.²²

Jasper Wyman described digging eight feet down and also coming away with nothing but the desire to ignore disappointment and to press on: “We carefully panned the gravel and dirt from each firing and day’s digging and also when we struck bedrock but not a single color did we find. As that’s a part of the game we will try and think nothing of it but will return down stream and try another creek below on our way back.”²³

While many stampeders in the Koyukuk region stuck close to their new cabins, some wandered far and wide, which in a few cases meant pressing north as far as the Brooks Range and beyond. In the case of Herman Carpenter, captain of the *Beaver*, he remained independent of any mining company and managed to build his own cabin, hunt his own moose and caribou, and investigate a rumor of gold up the Alatna that took him over the Continental Divide in the heart of the mountains and onto the vast tundra plain leading to the Arctic Ocean. In his published account *Three Years in Alaska* (1901), Car-



penter described the expedition in early November that tested his ability to survive:

Being so near the head of the river I decided to cross the Arctic divide on the Arctic slope. We found no heavy timber, nothing but willow brush; with it, it was very difficult to keep warm in that terribly cold weather. . . . We did not stay long here, as we could not make a comfortable fire with willow brush, and the wind blew incessantly.²⁴

When Carpenter and his traveling partner returned to the camps, Wyman and three other men were just leaving Rapid City for two weeks of digging holes and hunting caribou, ptarmigan, spruce grouse, and snowshoe hares. But as they moved south

A young Koyukon Athabaskan and the stamper Claude Hobart running a dog team comprised of newly arrived dogs and Native huskies, 1898. Alaska State Library, Claude Hobart Collection (P425-6-6).



Jasper Wyman and companions from Illinois dig a shaft on Youngs Creek near the Alatna River, December 5, 1898. Anchorage Museum, Jasper N. Wyman Collection (B1989.24.103).

along the Alatna River, they encountered another group who related news of a tragic accident. Only a few days earlier, a miners' meeting had been called at Beaver City because a member of the *Eclipse* party from Gloucester, Massachusetts, a man they called Old Charley, was missing.

The man had been mining with a group along Help-Me-Jack Creek, and on the trail home he wandered away from his companions. The weather was cold—fifteen to twenty below zero—and although he had a pack of food with him, his disappearance was so strange that they began to fear the worst. A call for volunteers went up, and on the second day they found his body along a ravine that led in the direction of a nearby mountain. The corpse was frozen stiff in a seated position on a log and nearby the search party found the man's frying pan and a box of matches. By tracing his footprints, they learned that he had crossed and re-crossed his own trail many times and that he had stumbled quite close to the *Eclipse* camp before discarding his backpack and writing in the snow "I am lost and dying." His comrades tied the body to a sled to transport him back to his cabin and later buried him in the only grave available, a prospect hole he himself had dug in the frozen earth. This affair cast a gloom over the inhabitants of Beaver City because, as Captain Winchester explained,

We could read on that poor, thin, haggard face, the sorrowful tale of those last few days of terrible suffering. . . . I have seen strong men become total wrecks physically, from the effects of wandering about in the wilds of Alaska, not knowing where they are. I have known others to become demented from the same cause, and never regain their reason.²⁵

November was a busy time for all of the Koyukuk stampeders. There were more cabins to build, mining claims to register, holes to dig, firewood to cut, and daily opportunities for hunting and ice fishing. Many adapted quickly to their strange new surroundings, growing stronger and learning to build lean-



tos or erect tents to warm themselves while traveling in the backcountry. Even the death of Old Charley could not dampen for long the feeling some had that they were engaged in the adventure of a lifetime. But for others, the cold and dark and the cramped conditions in their cabins produced a despondency that was hard to escape. Many suffered from homesickness and others from boredom and the sense of being trapped. On November 24, 1898, after a long day of travel, Jasper Wyman and his companions were hunkered down in a tent

at Rapid City when he scribbled a sentence in his diary that revealed a great deal about the challenges faced by the Koyukuk prospectors: "Although this is Thanksgiving Day, I have not yet seen anything to give thanks for, unless it is for being in camp once more where we fill ourselves up on beans and bacon." Wyman's comments hint at the crisis of morale that would haunt the camps and at another stark reality—over time, the nutritional limits of the miners' menu would become a matter of life and death.

Jasper Wyman and his fellow gold-seekers travel along Tomagon Creek, November 24, 1898. The heavy sled is guided from the rear by a stick called a "gee pole." Anchorage Museum, Jasper N. Wyman Collection (B1989.24.93).



In mid-November 1898 a Koyukuk stamper known only as Old Charley wandered away from his prospecting party and was later found sitting on a log, the body frozen stiff. His comrades managed to straighten the corpse and to transport him back to camp tied to this sled. Alaska State Library, Claude Hobart Collection (P425-6-25).



Norman Aldrich (right) and friends play cards in one of the tiny cabins in West Beaver, 1898. The cramped quarters and cold weather outside led to many cases of "cabin fever" marked by quarrels and bouts of depression. Alaska State Library, Claude Hobart Collection (P425-6-9).

ENDNOTES

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- ² “Plenty of Supplies for the Dawsonites,” *San Francisco Call*, October 5, 1898, 4.
- ³ “Winter Quarters of Northern Craft,” *San Francisco Call*, January 30, 1899, 2; “News from the Koyukuk,” *Yukon Press*, February 15, 1899, 1; “On Foot for 3,000 Miles,” *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, April 19, 1899, 10.
- ⁴ Phillip M. Coffee, ed., *El Sueño de Oro: The Dream of Gold* (Victoria, B.C.: Trafford Publishing, 2005), 143.
- ⁵ “Gold-Lined Gravel Bars,” *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, January 31, 1899, 6.
- ⁶ “News from the Koyukuk,” *Yukon Press*, January 31, 1899, 1.
- ⁷ Gordon C. Bettles, “First Surgery on the Koyukuk,” *Alaska Life* (July 1941), 5, 20.
- ⁸ “News from the Koyukuk,” *Yukon Press*, January 31, 1899, 1.
- ⁹ “On the Kakukuk,” *Sacramento Record-Union*, January 30, 1899, 7; “Drowning of John G. Tait,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, January 30, 1899, 1; “No News of Tait’s Death,” *Chicago Tribune*, January 31, 1899, 12. See also, Diary of John G. Tait, University of Alaska Fairbanks Archives, Charles Harris Papers.
- ¹⁰ “Almost Crazy by Starvation,” *San Francisco Call*, July 3, 1899, 2.
- ¹¹ “A Hard Trip,” *Yukon Press*, February 15, 1899, 2; “May Have Perished During a Storm,” *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, March 2, 1899, 4; “Story of the Folger Party,” *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, July 3, 1899, 5.
- ¹² James D. Winchester, *Capt. J.D. Winchester’s Experience on a Voyage from Lynn, Massachusetts, to San Francisco, Cal., and to the Alaskan Gold Fields* (Newcomb & Gauss, 1900), 195.
- ¹³ Jasper N. Wyman diary, September 27, 1898, Anchorage Museum, Wyman Collection.
- ¹⁴ Wyman diary, October 5, 1898.
- ¹⁵ Wyman diary, October 14, 1898.
- ¹⁶ Claus Rodine, letter to his wife from St. Michael, July 1, 1899, Alaska State Library, Papers of Claus Rodine (MS-134).
- ¹⁷ Wyman diary, October 5, 1898.
- ¹⁸ Winchester, *J.D. Winchester’s Experience*, 198.
- ¹⁹ Wyman diary, October 10, 1898.
- ²⁰ “Two Seasons in the Koyukuk Gold Fields,” *Seattle-Post Intelligencer*, April 8, 1900, 26.
- ²¹ Winchester, *J.D. Winchester’s Experience*, 201.
- ²² Rodine letter, July 1, 1899.
- ²³ Wyman diary, December 6, 1898.
- ²⁴ Herman Carpenter, *Three Years in Alaska* (Philadelphia: Howard Company, 1901), 59.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, 61; Winchester, *J.D. Winchester’s Experience*, 199-200; Wyman diary, November 15, 1898.



Icy overflow on the Koyukuk North Fork,
2008. Courtesy of Carl Johnson.

Chapter 4: The Scurvy Demon—Stampeders Face Disease and Desperation

*We have been striving very hard not to keep our appetites
which we always have, but to keep ourselves healthy and the
scurvy demon from our door.*

—Jasper Wyman, January 28, 1899

During most of November and December 1898, Jasper Wyman and various prospecting partners covered hundreds of miles along the Alatna, testing tributaries that they named along the way: Ptarmigan Creek, Little Dick Creek, Rocky Bottom Creek, Youngs Creek, Help-Me-Jack Creek, and Malamute River. In his diary he wrote about the agony of pulling sleds weighing up to 400 pounds and of the eerie feeling of knowing that the only signs of humanity he could expect to find were the footprints of Koyukon hunters.¹ He reported that camping in the snow was exceedingly uncomfortable, the nights were bitterly cold, and that fur hats, gloves, and layers of wool clothing did not protect him from frostbite on his nose and fingers. He also reported never being able to eat enough to satisfy his gnawing hunger and stumbling into camp, weary and ravenous. After weeks of travel, he routinely stopped at Rapid City or West Beaver to resupply and then headed out again with his friend Norman Aldrich and a new group of volunteers. “It seems pretty tough not to get even one day’s rest until I am on the trail again,” he wrote, “but we came to Alaska for gold and we must keep continuously searching for it, for time is money, and

worst of all we are continually risking our lives and health.”²

On one occasion in late December, Wyman and his compatriots broke camp on Little Dick Creek and started on a modest seven mile trek to reach Rapid City. It was Wyman’s birthday, and although the trek they had planned was short (often they had traveled twenty miles or more in a day), this time the trail and the dropping temperature offered greater perils than normal. As Wyman explained,

We didn’t realize how cold it was or perhaps we would not have started, but we soon found out that it was colder than we had yet experienced for I had not gone far till I froze my toes, although my body was sweating. We stopped and the boys quickly made a fire and I thawed my feet out as best I could by holding snow on them and keeping close to the fire. All warm and thawed out, we made haste down the river again.³

They had not traveled far before one of the men broke through a thin patch of ice and emerged drenched to his waist. The group



Jasper Wyman and his comrades pull a heavily loaded sled along the Alatna River (then called the Allenkaket) during severe cold temperatures, December 10, 1898. In these conditions, twisting an ankle or falling through thin ice into overflow could be life threatening. Anchorage Museum, Jasper N. Wyman Collection (B1989.24.104).

stopped and built another fire, but not before the man's feet were frostbitten. Then they rushed on to Rapid City and by noon reached the welcomed sight of warm log cabins. Inside the nearest one were the *Argo* men from Ohio, and Wyman's group was soon huddling in front of a woodstove with hot coffee and "fried cakes" to eat. Then they were informed that outside it was fifty-six degrees below zero. Wyman later made this wry comment in his diary: "Had we realized that it was so cold we certainly would have frozen."⁴ The next day was the winter solstice, and although the temperature dropped to sixty below, Wyman set up his camera and took a photograph of the occupants of Rapid City who stood outside bundled in furs and wool while wisps of smoke rose from their cabins and canvas wall tents.

Wyman's next stop was West Beaver where he was greeted by his fellow Illinoisians just in time for Christmas. They all celebrated with an elaborate dinner and Wyman, because he felt obsessed with food, listed the menu in his diary: bread, bacon, spaghetti, soup, gravy, butter, potatoes, canned pineapple, canned apricots, pie and cake, and hot cocoa. Some of the men from Beaver City joined in the festivities and brought with them violins, guitars, a banjo, and a cornet. As Wyman explained, it was an opportunity to forget their worries and for him to document the moment on film: "In the evening the Beaver boys and a number of others gathered in with their musical instruments and we surely had a jolly good time and lots of fun—we had 8 pieces of music. I



Occupants of the Alutna River mining camp of Rapid City come out at sixty below zero, December 21, 1898. Taking photographs at these temperatures and in low light was a serious challenge. Anchorage Museum, Jasper N. Wyman Collection (B1989.24.108).



Members of the Cleveland-Alaska Mining & Milling Company in Rapid City, December 21, 1898. To fend off the cold they wore furs, skin parkas, and improvised mukluks made from a blanket and string. Anchorage Museum, Jasper N. Wyman Collection (B1989.24.110).



"Music Hath Charms"—To dispel the winter gloom residents of Beaver City held evening concerts, January 11, 1899. The band includes Josie Campbell (with mandolin) and her young nephew, William Campbell, who plays a homemade fiddle. Anchorage Museum, Jasper N. Wyman Collection (B1989.24.132).

then took my camera and made a flash light picture of the crowd." By the next day the weather warmed to sixteen below zero and the men staged a holiday shooting match—three shots for a quarter at a target 125 yards away, and the pot provided the prize money. Wyman took third place and Norman Aldrich claimed first.⁵

But an evening of festivities could not change the poor morale in the camps along the Alatna and elsewhere in the Koyukuk gold camps. The bitter cold had driven many stampederers inside where they had ample time to brood and complain. Some were so discouraged that they no longer believed gold existed in that part of Alaska and many refused to continue prospecting. According

to Dr. John Hewitt, formerly of the Illinois group, this widespread frustration led to some practical joking in one camp:

A man panning gravel had lost a gold filling from a tooth, which had fallen straight into the pan. 'Eureka, I've struck it!' quipped this prince of comics. And then his terrific, but twisted, sense of humor had invented the prank. Breaking up the filling into small pieces, he placed them in an empty cartridge shell, and exhibited it as a prospect to his own party.⁶

This hoax and other false reports circulated through the camps and caused groups of

the hopeful to rush off to investigate some distant creek. And when the men returned tired and empty-handed they felt understandably hostile to the rumormongers and more wretched than before.

Wyman was fortunate because he could occupy himself with his photography, developing all the plates he had exposed in recent weeks and taking quite a few more pictures around West Beaver and Beaver City. He also took cooking lessons from an elderly stamperder from Chicago named Mr. Leonard. Housekeeping was another way to remain active, although for many of the stampederders cooking, cleaning, and washing were not chores they were used to performing for themselves. As Wyman explained, there were no mothers or sisters around to do this hard work:

This has been a very busy day for me. I think that is what the women folk would call it at home. It has been a wash-day and bread-baking. I washed up all my dirty clothes, rubbed them until my knuckles were all blistered, rubbing on a home-made wash-board, called them clean, then hung them out to freeze and dry. But bread-making was a rather new experience for me. I made my first batch of yeast or raised bread today and am very proud to say that I was successful.⁷

Meanwhile, Norman Aldrich passed his time playing his violin and practicing music with a friend from Indiana. Wyman noted, “They say with their musical instruments they may have to make their gold so they will practice up.”⁸ The stampederders also passed the time talking with a local Koyukon chief they called Indian Sam Mallimoot who visited the mining camps to trade snowshoes and



fur parkas for rifle cartridges, flour, tea, and sugar. Sam had stories to tell about gold nuggets he found on northern creeks, and he was also known to be an accomplished hunter and would partner with some of the gold-seekers in pursuit of caribou and Dall sheep.⁹

For most of the men, long evenings were spent cutting firewood or playing checkers using coffee beans and corn kernels for the checkerboard pieces or “bean poker” employing beans in place of money.¹⁰ The card game 7-Up was popular in the camps, and one stampeder described a scene repeated day after day: “After the frugal meal was eaten, often we used to take the dirty cards from the shelf over the rickety table, and pull the hair down over our eyes and be real tough and play 7up by the flickering candle light and feed the fire while the air crackled with cold without.”¹¹ But this largely sedentary life made the men restless, and as Wyman explained, the most popular topic of conversation was how soon they would be able to leave:

Members of a mining company from the steamboat *Marjorie* relax in their spruce pole bunk, 1899. Because the floors of the stampederders' cabins were so cold, elevated bunks were a necessity. Alaska State Library, Claude Hobart Collection (P425-6-31).

Prospects look discouraging as there has been nothing more discovered than we found on our first arrival, some good colors. The people here are all talking over their trip telling each other why and how they came here and are now planning and wondering how they will manage to get out of there if nothing is found, as they don't seem to think it will be found now, but it has already become a general by-word 'I guess we will have to go out with the ice.'¹²

But even though the men in the camps spoke yearningly of returning to their sweethearts and wives, romance did occasionally blossom, even in Beaver City. The only unmarried woman in the Alatna camps was young Josie Campbell, and this fact did not escape the notice of lonely stampeder. Josie lived with her sister and brother-in-law and their six-year-old son William, and the Campbells ran a modest store out of their cabin with a sign above the door that read "For Sale: Flour, Bacon, Beans, Candles, Etc." As men visited the store, they quickly came to admire Josie. In his account, Captain James Winchester wrote this about the woman who seemed to light up the interior of the gloomiest cabin. "Josie shouldered her axe and drove her stakes on three or four creeks, yet she was a refined woman, and something of a mandolin player," he explained. "This is the style of our western woman, with the strengths of a man and his endurance, while she possesses the modest refinement of a lady."¹³

Because Winchester was feeling poorly and spent most of his time in his cabin, he had occasion to witness the comings and goings around the Campbell store and to observe a scene that had as much to do with firewood as it did with affairs of the heart. As he explained, Josie had a suitor by the name of

Dane, but when she found out he had a wife, she "gave him the sack, and he packed down the river." However, Dane was not the only man interested in winning Josie's attention, and Winchester noticed that the constant need for firewood to fend off the winter chill provided Josie with a means of selecting her next beau:

As she helped [Mr.] Campbell saw the fire-wood, she always managed to have her end of the saw when a new lover appeared. Of course he took her place, and she went into the house; if she wanted wood all carried in, she would go out to get an armload, when there would be a rush of three or four aspirants, and they would manage to bring it in. They were standing around the gate day and night.¹⁴

One of her suitors tried to catch her attention with his harmonica (Winchester said he was "always tooting on that"), and another had such bushy hair that he rarely wore a hat in the cold and the men nicknamed him Brush. But according to Winchester, an Alabama man named Harry Bounce who played the guitar had the inside track and was often invited to visit the Campbell cabin. As Winchester explained,

Poor Harry was quite smitten. The other lovers packed down the river, one after another, and left him amusing Josie with his guitar, and helping saw wood. As Josie had a party of four who played on different pieces [instruments], Harry was not without a rival, and the boys would say, as she discarded one and accepted another, 'Campbell has got a new wood-chopper, where is the other?'



Members of the Galesburg-Alaska Mining & Developing Company play cribbage to pass the long, dark winter evenings, December 30, 1898. Anchorage Museum, Jasper N. Wyman Collection (B1989.24.114).



Mr. and Mrs. Campbell, their son William, and Mrs. Campbell's sister Josie (right) stand outside their modest store which advertises flour, bacon, beans, and candles, January 11, 1899. Anchorage Museum, Jasper N. Wyman Collection (B1989.24.129).



A group of Illinoisans use wood fires to thaw frozen gravel in a process called "burning down," January 6, 1899. Anchorage Museum, Jasper N. Wyman Collection (B1989.24.123).

'Oh, gone down the river," or, 'She has sent so and so down the river.'

The question of Josie's love life was not the only drama in the Alutna mining camps. The men were clearly tired of finding no gold and of living with each other in close quarters. Josie's friend Dane appeared again later

in Winchester's account when an argument with his mining partner escalated to violence. As Winchester explained, Dane and his partner May were already angry and suspicious of each other when a minor accident led to a cascade of murderous threats and disputes with multiple stampedeers:

[May] was dancing around the shaft upon McAlpine creek in his anger and fell into a fire which they had to thaw and got scorched, for which he blamed Dane, and swore he would shoot him. I believe May was a little affected in the head by his actions for he got furious with Ryan, because he claimed that Ryan had told Kyle about this claim he was holding illegally, and Kyle went to the recorder and found it and traded it with May for one on another creek. Kyle would not tell who told him, so May blamed it on Ryan, as he was the only one that knew, and came over one morning to give him a thrashing.¹⁵

These sorts of petty feuds only added to the hazards the men faced every day they spent searching for gold or traveling in the wilderness. On one afternoon along Help-Me-Jack Creek, Harry Bounce faced death at the bottom of a mining shaft because as his companions were taking dirt from the shaft one of them accidentally let the windlass rope slip. The heavy wooden bucket fell like a shot to the bottom of the hole, thirty-seven feet down, and struck Harry on the leg and foot. The blow crippled him but broke no bones. As Wyman explained, "Had it struck him a fair lick it would have crushed him into a jelly. The boys were much frightened at first, [and] they got him out of the hole and brought to the cabin. It will lay him up for a few days."¹⁶

Although a number of doctors joined the stampede to the Koyukuk, medical knowledge in the 1890s was far from standardized and treatment options were rudimentary. This included dentistry as Gordon Bettles learned when a lower left molar began to trouble him. As Bettles recalled, he sought the assistance of a doctor name Nolan, who “after careful examination and what I deemed needless probing, yanked the tooth.” However, Bettles was not yet cured. He was preparing his dog team to investigate reports of rich diggings on the Koyukuk Middle Fork, and over the next two weeks, with every additional mile, the left side of his face swelled. “By the time we got to the miners’ camp on the Middle Fork,” he explained, “my face and neck were so swollen that I could hardly eat, and sleep was well-nigh impossible.” After thirty days on the trail he was delirious with pain and had lost fifty pounds. As he recalled, “I could no longer open my jaws. I could not speak above a whisper. My only food for more than five weeks was Borden’s Eagle Brand Milk that was poured drop by drop into my mouth.” To solve the problem, the doctor gave his patient several slugs of whiskey and employed a sharp metal spike called a trocar to pierce the abscess and drain the pus. This left Bettles, by his own account, “an utterly inert mass of quivering flesh and bones.” In spite of the primitive methods, the surgery was a success.¹⁷

As winter advanced a more serious health problem was developing in the camps and causing considerable fear among the stampeders—scurvy. The disease, caused by a diet lacking Vitamin C, had been known for centuries and was often considered an illness restricted to sailors on long voyages. The Portuguese captain Vasco de Gama recognized its symptoms in 1498 while sailing around the horn of Africa, and he knew its cure—he fed his men citrus fruits that delivered a high dose of Vitamin C. Nearly three centuries

later, Captain James Cook knew that lemon juice was a preventative, but for various reasons the British Navy stopped requiring its ships to carry citrus and medical understanding of the illness faded. Scurvy was always a threat at sea or on land whenever fruits, vegetables, and fresh meat were not available. On the Koyukuk the problem started as soon as the stampeders began eating the traditional miner’s menu of beans, bacon, and flour-based foods like biscuits, breads, and pancakes. Scurvy’s symptoms generally began with bleeding gums, loosening teeth, lethargy and joint pain. Old wounds and bruises become painful again and blackish spots appeared around hair follicles on the legs, leading many miners to call the disease “miners’ blackleg” or “blackleg fever.” Eventually the disease led to dramatic swelling in the legs and arms, intense pain, dementia and death.¹⁸

In the Koyukuk and elsewhere in Alaska, few stampeders could agree on either the cause of or the cure for scurvy. Although some gold-seekers were familiar with the threat and brought genuine preventatives like potatoes and onions or powdered ascorbic acid (Vitamin C’s chemical form), others tried “scurvy cures” of highly questionable value and expressed confusion about the disease’s frightening symptoms. Robert J. Young, captain of the *Lavelle Young*, for example, wrote to his wife on December 19, 1898 describing the mounting problem and speculating about its cause:

There is a great amount of sickness among the various companys. It is a very loathsome disease. The legs and arms swell up to twice their usual size and turn completely black with more or less pain. There has not been any deaths so far. The cause I believe is a poor variety of foods, lack of exercise and uncleanness.¹⁹

Following pages:
“Our Cabin Home”—A cook completes a batch of biscuits for the men in this Beaver City cabin, January 11, 1899. The lack of Vitamin C in a diet of beans, bacon, and biscuits led to many life threatening cases of scurvy in the Koyukuk camps. Anchorage Museum, Jasper N. Wyman Collection (B1989.24.131).



Jan. 11 - 1899.

Our



Cabin Home. Beaver City Alaska.

SIDENOTE 7:

PATENT MEDICINES AND SCURVY CURES

Experienced frontiersmen who know the country say that the men who have the scurvy are to blame themselves. It is said that many of those now stricken went into the country illy supplied with scurvy preventatives.

—Seattle Post-Intelligencer, April 5, 1899

As a science and as a profession, medicine in the 1890s was primitive and all manner of quackery thrived. In the American frontier, hucksters sold "patent medicines" they claimed could cure the sick, lame, and unlucky. When it came to treating scurvy, some stampeder believed the disease was sign of a moral failing—they blamed bad hygiene or laziness—and others purchased dubious scurvy cures. It was the Vitamin C (or ascorbic acid) in fruits, vegetables, and fresh meat that would prevent scurvy, but this was poorly understood. The Koyukuk stampeder William Coffee cared for many scurvy victims and gave his patients a mixture called Elixir of Vitriol containing sulfuric acid, alcohol, and aromatics like ginger and cinnamon. He also tried doses of hot springs water with traces of lithium, called Lithia Water, but neither of these would have any effect. Other scurvyites ate dried fruit, unaware that the process of drying destroyed the vitamin content. Marketers behind the most popular preventative did not reveal their recipe to naïve stampeder and boldly declared,

If you value your health as you should; if you want to safely insure yourself against the prevailing pest on the Klondike; if you expect to be able to conquer the innumerable difficulties you will have to face in that far away, isolated region, you will go into it properly supplied with Doctor Von Heik's Great German Scurvy Cure.

DR. VON HEIK'S

GREAT GERMAN SCURVY CURE

An Unerring Remedy for the Prevailing Pest on the Klondike.

**OF
INTEREST
TO
ALL
MINERS**

ONE THOUSAND DOLLARS REWARD

For Any Case of Scurvy

That Dr. Von Heik's Remedy will not cure or prevent if taken according to directions. This great cure is a powdered preparation put up in capsules so small that tin boxes which may be carried in the vest pocket. Do not take citric or other acids; they have been tried and found not adapted to that climate.

**A
POSITIVE
PREVENTIVE
OR
CERTAIN
CURE**

For Sale by all Druggists and Klondike Outfitters. PRICE 75c PER BOLL. Ask for It and Take Nothing But

Dr. Von Heik's Great German Scurvy Cure

Advertisement
in Seattle Post-
Intelligencer,
February 23, 1898

Young was correct about the stampeders' limited menu, but he was part of an ill-informed majority who believed the filth and sloth contributed to the onset of scurvy. In fact, a considerable stigma was associated with sufferers because their companions either thought they were lying or considered them to be lazy and unhygienic and therefore to blame for their own suffering. Herman Carpenter, who by all accounts was more robust than most, took a dim view of the men who stayed close to their cabins or slept long hours in their bunks, and he knew who to blame:

Among this class of people there were many cases of scurvy, which I think is largely the result of inaction. I have never known of a person who would get out and work, and keep clean, to have this terrible affliction. On the contrary, the men whom I have known to have it were those who seldom took a bath, and who would get up and eat a hearty meal, and then go and lie down in their bunks again, where they would stay most of the time.²⁰

Meanwhile, Wyman and his friends were drinking a powdered acid solution each day in a cup of water, and he wrote in his diary, "We have been striving very hard not to keep our appetites which we always have, but to keep ourselves healthy and the scurvy demon from our door." Evidence suggests that what the Illinoisans were ingesting was not ascorbic acid but rather acetic acid, a derivative of vinegar that would have done nothing to prevent scurvy. What was more likely keeping them healthy was the same thing that prevented scurvy in Alaska's indigenous people, the regular consumption of fresh game meat which contains enough Vitamin C to prevent the disease.²¹

By January 1899 the accounts of scurvy victims were mounting. One newspaper described a 300-mile slog to reach the Koyukuk undertaken by William H. Bens and his wife. The couple began at the Selawik River on Kotzebue Sound and pushed eastward, but along the way the husband died of scurvy and Mrs. Bens managed to reach the Alatna River on her own where the miners gave her spruce needle tea containing enough Vitamin C to save her life. The article listed eleven other men who had died in the Kotzebue region where the illness was known as "blackleg fever." Meanwhile, Tim Spellacy of the St. Mary's Milling & Mining Company of Ohio reported that one out of three miners on the Alatna were suffering from scurvy, and that further south along the Koyukuk at Red Mountain, where his steamboat was anchored, three Englishmen had died of a "strange disease" that had driven them insane. The men were from the Klondyke Research Syndicate of Liverpool and their steamboat, the *Research*, had been shipped in parts all the way from England. The disease causing havoc in the camps had not spared them, and the newspaper explained, "The doctors on the Koyukuk could not tell what was the trouble with the men. Fits of despondency seemed to be the first symptoms, then came several fits of insanity. Death came only after extended suffering."²²

Most scurvy victims never found the opportunity to document their suffering. But Captain James D. Winchester, who had traveled around South America to reach San Francisco and then Alaska, wrote eloquently about falling victim to the disease in Beaver City. Winchester had been left in charge of his group's camp when his companions left on a prospecting expedition, and about a week later he reported waking up in the morning and being partially paralyzed. Knowing that he would freeze to death if his firewood ran

out, he managed to hobble to the next cabin and ask for help cutting wood. Back at his cabin, he moved benches and stools near the woodstove and used them as a bed and eating platform where he could cook for himself without having to walk around. He wrote, "My legs were so bad that it was impossible to straighten them out, and I moved about on the stools. My teeth were loose and gums sore." Because of the pain caused by chewing, Winchester was eating only bits of bread soaked in condensed milk. When a doctor arrived to examine the stricken man, he diagnosed the malady as "inflammatory rheumatism" and advised drinking a diluted solution of citric acid. Winchester rejected the doctor's prescription because he believed citric acid would only exacerbate rheumatism—this was just as well given that ascorbic acid (not citric acid) is the cure for scurvy.

Meanwhile, the temperature outside was dropping, and the last man who had been caring for him, a Swedish miner, announced he was leaving to prospect also. Winchester would nearly faint each time he rose to put wood in the stove, and by the light of a single candle he watched as white frost glistened on the walls where the Arctic cold penetrated the logs. Alone and abandoned, Winchester faced his own mortality and later wrote,

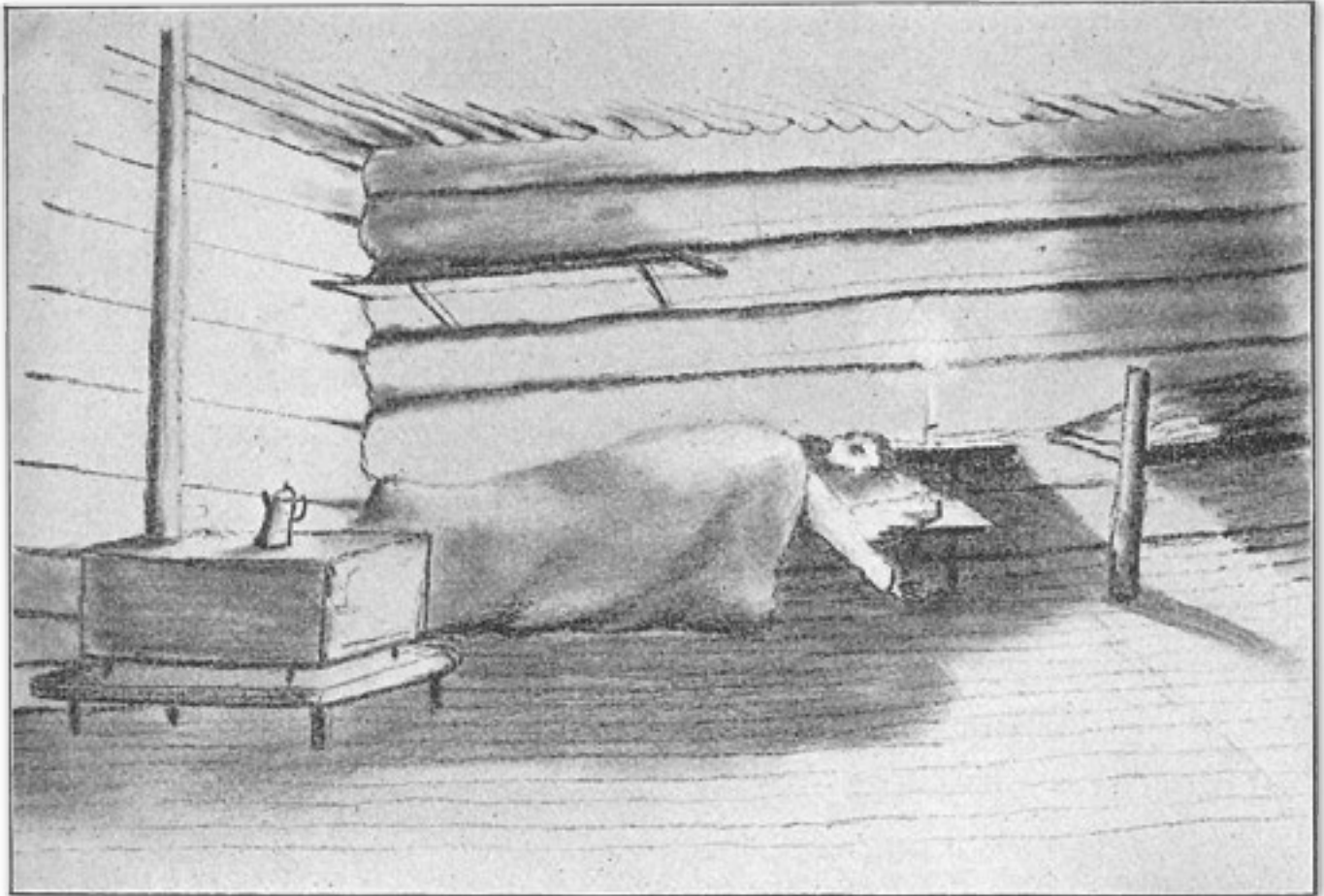
As long as there was a spark of life in me I managed to keep my fire in the stove going . . . I think they were afraid of some scourge for they had fled and left me in a living tomb. I kept my candle burning and the time went slow. I was getting to a state where I did not care whether I lived or died. I had given up all hopes of recovery and was waiting patiently for the end. I had become reconciled to my fates and felt ready to meet my maker.

Winchester cursed his decision to come north and with great bitterness he contemplated how the search for gold had blinded his fellows to human suffering. He wrote in his journal,

Sometimes I could hear a stranger passing. Would he step in? No, their hearts were filled with the greed of gold and what was a dying man compared to that? His cries, his groans could not reach their ears, for their hearts were cold; every tender feeling warmed in their breasts by the charitable fires of humanity, had disappeared and gold, gold, gold, had taken its place. How much like the brute the human family can be! Can they think to escape punishment?²³

But Winchester did not die. After many solitary days and nights, he was visited by a doctor from the *Beaver* who correctly diagnosed his illness and informed him that the only cure was the nutrition he could get from eating raw potatoes (in this case, the skins where Vitamin C resides). However, the closest source of potatoes was the Bergman trading post 100 miles to the south. Acting quickly, Winchester sold his stockpile of candles, which could fetch one dollar a piece in the gold camps, and sent the money by dog-sled courier to purchase the spuds that would save his life. Within days he received delivery of seventeen pounds of potatoes and three of onions. Because they had traveled by sled the vegetables were frozen, but Winchester reported they were delicious nonetheless.

According to him, many men left Beaver City because they feared that scurvy was contagious only to find that conditions were worse on the Koyukuk's South Fork and elsewhere where they had no potatoes or other scurvy cures like fruits or



powdered ascorbic acid. And Winchester marveled at the widespread confusion surrounding the disease:

It was something that the people were unacquainted with, and a great many doctors were puzzled, for with the scurvy a man appears very dull and stupid and sleeps a great deal. He is dying, and nobody knows it. His heart beats slow and his blood ceases to circulate, and he drops dead, when, perhaps, five minutes before, he has walked from his chair to his bed.²⁴

Meanwhile, life in the trading posts of Bergman, Peavy, and Arctic City was quite different. There they had ample food as well as reserves of alcohol and other distractions. The energetic Herman Carpenter described spending New Year's Day in Bergman where he witnessed a prize fight with a \$200 purse and called it "a pretty good scrap." In the evening a big dance was organized, and because there were only two white women in Bergman who would dance, the men set about teaching steps to the Koyukon women who attended.²⁵ As Carpenter recalled, the town had developed a much-deserved reputation for debauchery:

"I Lay Alone Struggling with Death"—In this pencil sketch, James Winchester from Lynn, Massachusetts depicts himself suffering in his cabin during a prolonged bout of scurvy. In the winter of 1898-1899 roughly thirty percent of the gold-seekers suffered the effects of this vitamin deficiency. From *J.D. Winchester's Experience on a Voyage . . .* (1900).



"Lunch Time"—
Stampeders eat donuts
and warm up by the
woodstove, February
28, 1899. Anchorage
Museum, Jasper N.
Wyman Collection
(B1989.24.156).

This town, for one of its size, was one of the toughest I had ever seen at that time, and the amount of whiskey those two or three hundred people would get away with in a day was astonishing. Their favorite amusements, after they had become pretty full, were fighting and wrestling, shooting out the lights, and also shooting the cabin full of holes.²⁶

For Carpenter this life held no attraction and he soon accepted command of a prospecting crew of five men who returned

north to Tramway Bar and followed the Middle Fork northward to the Arctic Divide. Following the popular notion that greater deposits of gold could be found the farther north one traveled, Carpenter's group pushed deep into the mountains of the Brooks Range where they entered a zone of alpine tundra. As he explained, traveling with sleds could become easier when deep snow was not an issue:

Through this section the mountains were very steep and the creeks very shallow, so that there was no use of

our prospecting in them, but we kept on in hope of passing through this belt, and reaching a more favorable looking country. We were now in a very high altitude, and we seemed to be almost out of the snow belt. The wind blew all the time, so that no snow could stay on the ice, and on its smooth surface the dogs could go on a run, even with their loads, nearly all the time.

On this occasion Carpenter and a partner left their group and crossed about ten miles across the Arctic Slope. There they shot some snowshoe hares and found a clump of willow brush that supplied the wood to cook the meat over a fire. However, their stay was cut short because of temperatures of seventy to seventy-two degrees below zero that made the smokeless gunpowder in their rifle cartridges freeze and malfunction. In spite of some misfires, he managed to kill a Dall sheep and eventually returned to Peavy and Bergman.

Never content to be idle, Carpenter soon accepted an invitation to join a Koyukon hunting party going out for caribou. He observed that every night the group's shaman would call the adults together in a large tent and "go through a series of incantations, or 'make medicine,' as they call it, to see what luck they were going to have next day." For Carpenter their practices were hard to comprehend, though he dutifully recorded what he observed in his journal. On one occasion he noted certain hunting rituals and wrote,

Everything in nature has a meaning for them. If they see a fish jump out of the water, it is a good or evil omen, according to whether it is heading up or down stream at the time. After an animal is killed, each one must hit it with his rifle or hunting knife, to give

the owner good luck the next time he sees any game.²⁷

After twenty-eight days, the hunting party had killed a number of caribou and two moose and had covered seventy miles before returning to the vicinity of Peavy. Although in the last two days Carpenter suffered from snow-blindness, he soon recovered and went out prospecting on Wild River, following the trail of some quartz rock a Koyukon man called to his attention.

Carpenter was not alone in undertaking lengthy winter treks. Wyman and his comrades had also gone to the Arctic Divide hunting caribou and had glimpsed the vast northern plain leading to the Arctic Ocean. He wrote with great pride the story of his first caribou kill and then the miserable days afterward when the whole group overindulged on fresh meat and ended up with extreme intestinal distress. Ultimately Wyman viewed hunting as distraction from his true goal—gold-seeking. Near the end of several weeks of travel he wrote, "I regret very much to turn back now as my greatest desire was to sink some holes and do some prospecting at the head of some of these streams up here. To hunt is great pleasure to me, but gold is what I want first of all if possible."²⁸

One unusual approach to gold-seeking was introduced to the Alatna River area by a man known only as Dr. Dyer who arrived late to Beaver City. According to Captain Winchester, "The doctor was slow but sure. He never rushed headlong into a venture, but took his time and looked the ground over, moving very carefully when he went ahead." Soon he produced what Winchester called "a cunning little device of his own he called a mineral rod, which would turn in his hands and point the place where the gold was to be found." The doctor was following the tradition of dowsing or doodlebugging, which

Prospectors pushing north into the mountains of the Brooks Range pause on the ice for a lunch of hardtack and coffee, 1899. One piece of equipment essential to such a trip was the boxy Yukon stove for cooking and heating. Alaska State Library, Claude Hobart Collection (P425-6-14).



Caribou skins hang on willows to dry after a group of Koyukon Athabascan hunters returned from a hunt in the central Brooks Range, 1899. The original caption explains, "The Indians go way up to the Arctic Slope to hunt on the divide and trade with the tribes from the far north Arctic coast; they come back with meat to trade after as the ice breaks up." Alaska State Library, Claude Hobart Collection (P425-6-17).

involved the use of a forked stick or other pointing tool which practitioners believed would locate underground water or minerals by some sort of enhanced magnetism. The miners questioned his tactics, and Winchester too observed the man's approach was more than unorthodox: "Dr. Dyer would never dig for it—it was too much work; but he could find it on the surface or close to it, so he played cards and smoked for a month and was no nearer starting than on the first day he came."²⁹

As the winter dragged on, Koyukuk stampeders became keenly aware that one of the disadvantages of seeking gold north of the Arctic Circle and hundreds of miles from the Yukon River was the lack of mail delivery. Many months had passed since they had read a letter from a loved one and homesickness was acute. Fortunately for them, a long-distance mailman named James W. Dodson, or simply "Windy Jim," had left St. Michael for the Yukon River by dogsled in November and by January 2, 1899 he was advancing up the Koyukuk River with an astonishing 3,000 letters. By February 3 he reached Bergman and Jimtown ten days later. The news ran through the mining camps like a flash, and three men from the Illinois group left their cabin on the Alatna River to retrieve the mail from Bergman. To their surprise, the cost to pick up a letter was one dollar at a time when first-class postage for a letter in the United States was two cents. Some letter recipients balked at the price, but Wyman was happy to pay for his letters and though they were six months old he read them again and again.³⁰

There were times over the course of the winter that Wyman waxed poetically about sitting in his "little, rustic, Arctic moss-covered cabin" mending his moccasins with caribou skin and sinew and watching the Aurora Borealis dance overhead. But

soon he returned to a familiar refrain for the Koyukuk stampeders: "We have sunk many holes and prospected well, now we must remain here in this prison, next thing to Hell, until summer, three months yet. Then with our canoes and steamer once more, we can run."³¹ It seems that receiving letters from home and the warmer temperatures in March only made their cabin fever more acute, and in their journals and letters home they often expressed bitterness about stampeding to an unprofitable corner of Alaska. For example, Thomas G. Youngs of the Alaska Union Mining Company wrote a letter on March 8, 1899 explaining to his wife why he could not bring himself to leave the Koyukuk just yet: "I would like to find a little gold anyway just to show that I did find some. I have put some of the colors I found in a bottle. They are about as big as a fly speck. I think I have 1 cent worth."³²

Others were angrier and thought they had identified a cruel conspiracy. For example, as he was recovering slowly from scurvy, Captain Winchester had one particular man in mind to blame for his suffering and the whole wasteful enterprise. He described the individual as a "squaw man" (referring to a white man married to an indigenous woman) and accused him of being the "boomer of the Koyukuk" who lied to stampeders to promote his own business interests. Winchester called this man Dorcross, and Jasper Wyman mentioned the same man but spelled the name Dolchrist. According to Winchester, this man was a cheat and a fraud:

He made a living by going down to the mouth of the Koyukuk, and inducing the people he met there going up the Yukon to go up the Koyukuk instead, by telling them stories of the fabulous wealth that lay within

This poem in *Yukon Press* on March 17, 1899 describes a reunion of two old friends, the mailman "Windy Jim" Dodson and gold miner "Koyukuk Joe" Matthews. Verses also refer to the high cost Dodson charged for postal delivery, the plague of scurvy in the camps, and the Kotzebue Sound "fake" to the west where stampedeers were finding no gold at all:

Windy Jim and Koyukuk Joe

One day at Bergman on the Koyukuk there came,
A man short and saucy, Windy Jim was his name;
Four dogs, U.S. mail and a malamute sled,
Was what he had when he drove up in front of the shed.

The mail he had brought for the chicakos he found,
Made them gather in crowds from all around,
But when he said \$1 per letter is the price you must pay,
Some busted their suspenders in efforts to get away.

In gazing around on the faces he saw,
There was one whose smile made his own face thaw,
T'was that of Joe Matthews, who in old days he had found,
When Windy and Joe were clam diggers on Puget Sound.

That night they both went to Bettles a visit to pay,
For he was sick so the report did say,
They found him in bed, but happy and gay,
Glad to see the two roosters who had come to his lay.

The next day on snow shoes they started,
The snow being deep that's what they wanted,
Three days did they take going it easy,
Then landed all wool and a yard wide in the town of Peavy.

Now it is not our intent or intention,
That Will Thompson we would forget to mention,
He was one of the suckers like many others we have found,
Who by Graham and others was led to the fake on Kotzebue Sound.

But he came over the hills so far away to the North,
And is now hitting the trail for Hamlin for all he is worth,
We are all here at Peavy, loading our sled,
And if we don't get to the States you will know we are dead.

They tried to lay us out in this city so fair,
But we were all too old to fall into the snare,
Preacher Rand of the steamboat they call *Crimmins*,
Got paralyzed and so did some others;
Now the sled is all loaded with mail, grub and house,
We will hit the trail for Dall River, nix-come-a-rouse.*

* "Nix-come-a-rouse" (also, "nix cum raus") is a German saying of obscure origins that entered English usage and means "I wish I had never come."



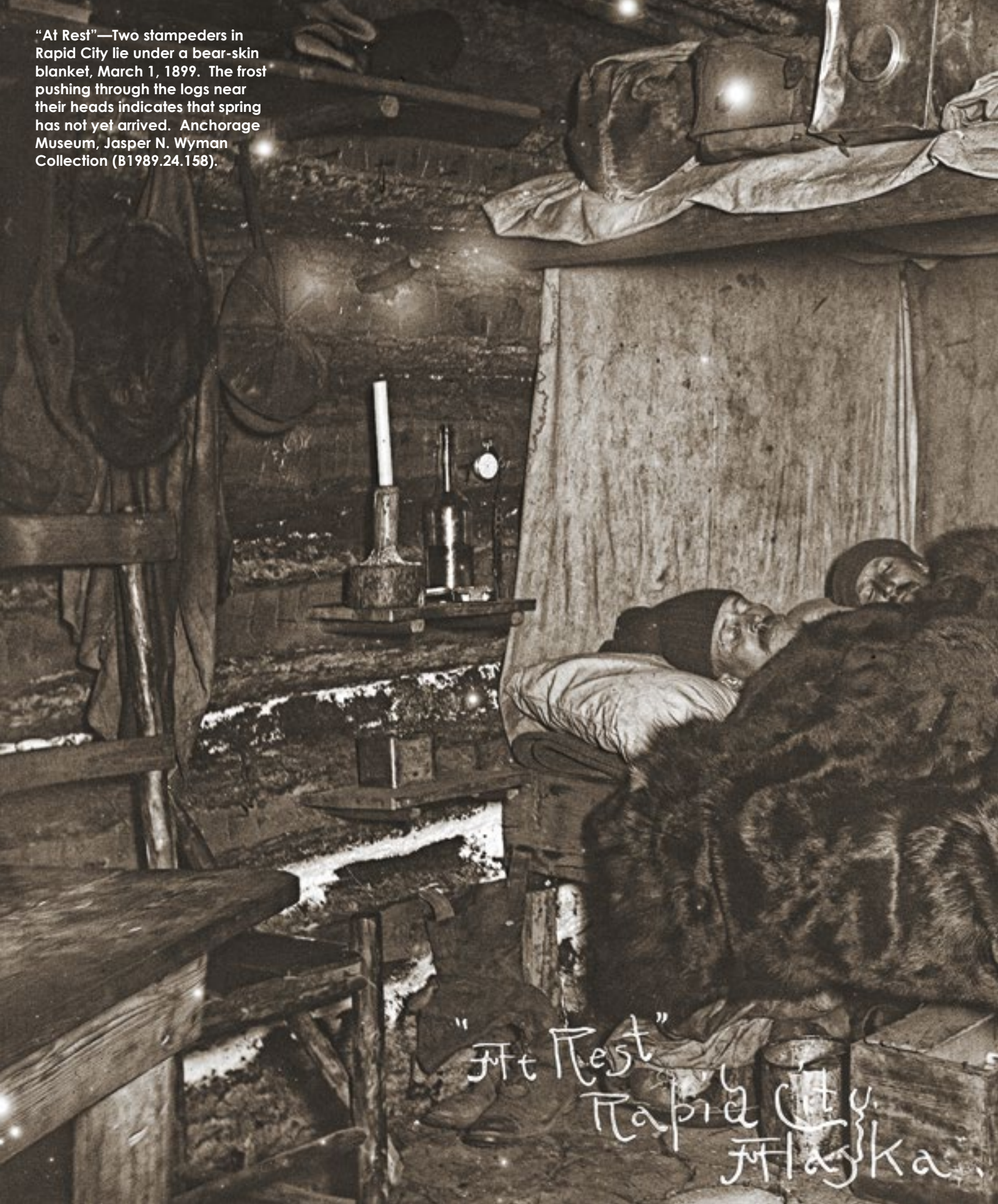
the gold belt of the Koyukuk. . . . so they built him a fine shack and dance hall [in Arctic City] and gave him a grubstake. Then they got the secret and worked upon that creek with all confidence, but found nothing.³³

But Winchester was not yet done analyzing the situation. In addition to the dastardly Dorcross, he sensed that a web of cynical agents had lured the gullible northward and destroyed countless families in the process:

Other men were operating on the different tributaries, the same as Dorcross. I wondered if some were not in the employ of the steamboat companies, who were carrying on a nefarious business by inducing men to leave their families, and mortgaging their little belongings to pay their passage up to Dawson. Many families were left destitute, for the craze of gold had seized their natural protectors, and they rushed off to Klondike.

Members of a mining company from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania use log cribbing and screw jacks to protect their steamboat *Jennie M.* from the destructive power of river ice, 1899. University of Alaska Fairbanks Archives, Alaska Historical Society Photograph Collection (1976-41-91).

"At Rest"—Two stampeder in Rapid City lie under a bear-skin blanket, March 1, 1899. The frost pushing through the logs near their heads indicates that spring has not yet arrived. Anchorage Museum, Jasper N. Wyman Collection (B1989.24.158).



"At Rest"
Rapid City
Alaska.



Mar 1 - 1899.

At Jasper Wyman's cabin in West Beaver, spring arrived on March 16 when the temperature rose above freezing and Wyman observed that his sod roof had begun to leak. He and his cabin-mates had been using a broom they fashioned from birch branches to keep the roof clean of snow, but it was leaking anyway. Aware that his time in that part of the world was limited, Wyman was taking more photographs than usual. And he observed that Koyukon hunting parties were passing the mining camps on their way north to find caribou. In fact, Inupiaq men from the Kobuk River far to the west had also arrived on a hunting excursion with six sleds and twenty dogs.³⁴ As he often did, Wyman tried to trade with them for a fur parka and mukluks, but he was too busy preparing to leave to pay much attention to bartering. Elsewhere in the Koyukuk hundreds of stampedeers were also contemplating their last days in the Far North.

At Jimtown on the South Fork roughly two hundred residents began to mobilize. At Union City, near the junction of the South Fork and John River, there were between eighteen and twenty log cabins and a population of over one hundred. They too began packing up to for the journey south. There were 250 people at Bergman; 50 at Arctic City; and 150 at Peavy. And the rest were scattered in smaller camps along the Koyukuk. Together they had managed to create what the newspapers called "the farthest north inland mining district in the world," but there was one cruel reality—the gold was desperately hard to find in paying quantities.³⁵ One Koyukuk miner known only as Hungarian John expressed it this way: "Gold, gold everywhere. Gold, but Lord, no gold." By this he meant that he could find signs of gold everywhere, but nowhere could he find enough to show a profit at the end of a difficult mining season.³⁶

ENDNOTES

¹ Jasper N. Wyman diary, November 9, 1898, Anchorage Museum, Wyman Collection.

² Wyman diary, November 20, 1898.

³ Wyman diary, December 20, 1898.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Wyman diary, December 25, 1898.

⁶ John M. Hewitt, *The Alaska Vagabond, Doctor Skookum: Memories of an Adventurous Life* (New York: Exposition Press, 1953), 81.

⁷ Wyman diary, December 31, 1898.

⁸ Wyman diary, December 28, 1898.

⁹ James D. Winchester, *Capt. J.D. Winchester's Experience on a Voyage from Lynn, Massachusetts, to San Francisco, Cal., and to the Alaskan Gold Fields* (Newcomb & Gauss, 1900), 201; Aurlette Ingman, "Gold Dust," (1938), 112, 128-129, based on Jasper N. Wyman's diary, Anchorage Museum, Wyman Collection.

¹⁰ Wyman diary, December 27, 1898-January 8, 1899

¹¹ See Alaska State Library, Claude Hobart Photograph Collection (P425-6-37a).

¹² Wyman diary, January 1, 1899.

¹³ Winchester, *Capt. J.D. Winchester's Experience*, 208.

¹⁴ Ibid., 209.

- ¹⁵ Ibid., 210.
- ¹⁶ Wyman diary, January 10, 1899; Ingman, “Gold Dust,” 109.
- ¹⁷ Gordon C. Bettles, “First Surgery on the Koyukuk,” *Alaska Life* (July 1941), 20-21.
- ¹⁸ Robert F. Scott, *The Voyage of the Discovery* (London: Forgotten Books, 2013 [1907 Reprint]), 404-5.
- ¹⁹ Robert J. Young, letter to his wife Elizabeth Young, December 19, 1898, Oregon Historical Society, R.J. Young Collection. See also, Evey Ruskin, “Letters to Lizzie: A Koyukuk Gold Seeker Writes Home,” *Anchorage Daily News (We Alaskans)*, May 6, 1984, O-10.
- ²⁰ Herman Carpenter, *Three Years in Alaska* (Philadelphia: Howard Company, 1901), 64.
- ²¹ Wyman diary, January 28, 1899.
- ²² “Twelve Scurvy Victims,” *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, July 19 1899, 1; “Deaths from Scurvy,” *Los Angeles Herald*, July 21, 1899, 3; “Strange Disease Claims Many Gold Seekers in Far Away Alaska,” *Gutherie Daily Leader*, July 22, 1899, 1; “Horrors of Alaska,” *Eugene City Guard*, July 29, 1899, 2. Claude Hobart wrote on a group photograph of stampeders taken at Beaver City, “35% of these fellows had scurvy in the winter, some died, one froze to death, several lost toes and fingers . . . more men drown than anything else.”
- ²³ Winchester, *J.D. Winchester’s Experience*, 203-212.
- ²⁴ Ibid., 208-210.
- ²⁵ Carpenter, *Three Years in Alaska*, 66-67.
- ²⁶ Ibid., 63.
- ²⁷ Ibid., 71-72.
- ²⁸ Wyman diary, February 24, 1899.
- ²⁹ Winchester, *J.D. Winchester’s Experience*, 215.
- ³⁰ Wyman diary, March 2-8, 1899; “On Foot for 3,000 Miles,” *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, April 19, 1899, 10.
- ³¹ Wyman diary, March 12, 1899.
- ³² Thomas G. Youngs, letter to his wife from Bear Creek Cabin, March 8, 1899, from transcription by Youngs family and shared with author by George Lounsbury.
- ³³ Winchester, *J.D. Winchester’s Experience*, 219.
- ³⁴ Wyman diary, March 10-14, 1899.
- ³⁵ “News from Koyukuk,” *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, March 16, 1899, 6; “More Tales of Suffering,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 17, 1899, 2; “Koyukuk Gold Fields,” *Salem Daily Capital Journal*, March 20, 1899; “From Koyukuk Country,” *Argus* (Holbrook, AZ), March 18, 1899, 1.
- ³⁶ “Two Seasons in the Koyukuk Gold Fields,” *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, April 8, 1900, 26.



River ice at the headwaters of the
Alatna River, 2015. Courtesy of
Ken Hill, National Park Service.

Chapter 5: A Koyukuk Exodus—Stampeders Flee from Alaska’s Far North

After I left the old shack I never turned back to take a last look, for there was nothing to see or remember about it but suffering.

—Beaver City resident James Winchester, 1899

By mid-March 1899 the temperature in the upper Koyukuk River region had climbed above zero and snow fell occasionally. The rivers and creeks remained frozen and pulling a sled or leading a dog team over the ice was still safe. Jasper Wyman and Norman Aldrich were some of the first to pack their sleds because they were eager to leave West Beaver and be reunited with the *Illinois*, the steamboat they had not seen for over six months. But they would not be travelling alone. When word got around, eleven other men from four other mining companies asked to accompany them. This departure marked the beginning of a mass exodus of stampeders from the Alatna River and from all the branches of the upper Koyukuk. Twenty miles downriver from West Beaver and Beaver City this initial group had grown to twenty, and they found shelter at Malamute Shack, a cabin of some fame because nearly every traveler up and down the river stopped there to sleep. Wyman wrote that they crowded into the cabin “like so many pigs with our nests all made up over the floor.”¹ In the photograph Wyman took that day one can see a penetrating fatigue etched into the men’s faces. And they were the lucky ones. James Winchester, who was still recovering from scurvy, tried to leave the Alatna

but was too weak to travel and was forced to turn back. He and the other scurvyites, as they were called, would have to wait another month before the ice went out and they could leave by boat.²

After four days of travel, Wyman reached the *Illinois* where he met other members the Galesburg-Alaska Mining & Developing Company and counted three cabins tucked into the woods. The vessel was still locked in two to three feet of ice along the edge of the river, and little work had been done toward chopping it out. “I am once more back to our old steamer with a part of our gang there,” Wyman wrote, “and it is the same old tune, complaints, grumbling and penurious curses that the devil himself couldn’t get along agreeable with.”³ Knowing that the steamboat would not be able to sail for some time, Wyman and Andy Kuhne moved downriver, and although they were pulling light loads, deep snow made traveling slow work. Kuhne’s progress was hampered by a lame leg, but even so he pitched in to help an “old gentleman” who had a bad case of scurvy. Together the three travelers spent the night on the steamboat *Eclipse* near the mouth of the Alatna River and then pushed on the remaining ten miles to the Bergman trading post.



Jasper Wyman and twelve others begin the exodus from the Alatna River gold camps, March 22, 1899. Because break-up was around the corner, many Koyukuk stampedeers mobilized to reach their steamboats and await the moment they could "go out with the ice." Anchorage Museum, Jasper N. Wyman Collection (B1989.24.188).

At Bergman they found a Wild West boomtown with a growing reputation for its boisterous nightlife. Unlike in the lesser mining camps, in Bergman alcohol flowed easily and minor disagreements between frustrated stampedeers often escalated into bloody fist-fights. Wyman reported that the major topic of discussion in Bergman was a boxing match set to happen on March 31. The boxers were Edward Kelley and Jake Cox who met in a ring made of canvas laid over ice at the mouth of a small creek. Before the bout Wyman photographed both men posing in a cabin, fists raised and ready for action, and he took multiple pictures of the fight itself. The \$250 purse went to Kelley when he knocked Cox out in the fifth round. Even though Bergman

residents had staged boxing matches over the winter, Wyman described this event in his diary as the "first prize fight ever fought in the Frigid Zone of Alaska."⁴

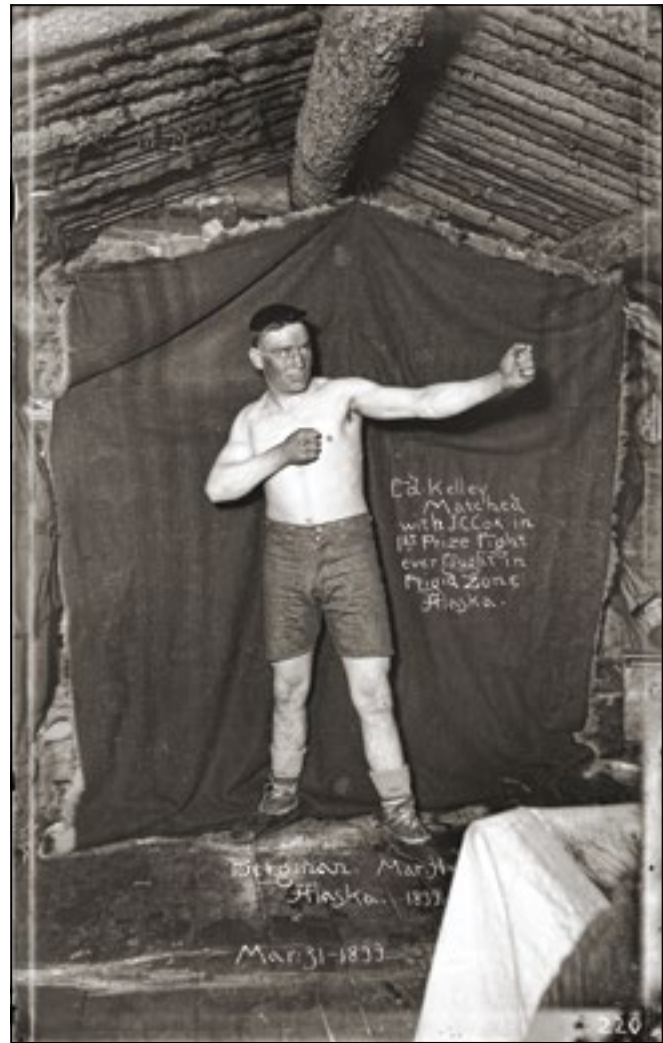
A few days later Wyman took his camera and traveled to Arctic City where he observed that the community had grown considerably since he last visited. When he first passed through there had been only one half-built log building and a few tents. Now he called it a "beautiful little village" with twenty cabins, a saloon, a dancehall, and a sawmill. There was even electrical power, though the generator, salvaged from a steamboat, was not working when Wyman arrived. He visited almost every cabin, renewing old friendships and making new ones, and he took dozens of



Eager to leave the Koyukuk region, this group stopped for a meal and a night's sleep at a cabin known as Malamute Shack 20 miles downriver from Beaver City, March 22, 1899. Their departure was an early indication of how eager most stampedeers were to flee southward. Anchorage Museum, Jasper N. Wyman Collection (B1989.24.190).



The Alaska Commercial Company store at Bergman, April 2, 1899. This tiny outpost just south of the Arctic Circle was a haven for stampedeers who left isolated mining camps seeking excitement like boozing and prize fights. Anchorage Museum, Jasper N. Wyman Collection (B1989.24.229).



The boxers Jake Cox (left) and Ed Kelley pose in makeshift log cabin studios before a fight, March 31, 1899. Anchorage Museum, Jasper N. Wyman Collection (B1989.24.192-193).

photographs. “I seem to be very welcome in town every cabin insisting that I stay and take dinner or supper and stay all night,” he wrote, “and I never feel so much at home any place here in Alaska as when I am among the miners.” Not wanting to wear out his welcome, Wyman decided to leave Arctic City and return to the *Illinois* but not before striking a deal with a stampeder who sold him a fur parka and leggings made of reindeer skin for seven dollars. According to Wyman, if it had not been spring when disillusioned stampedeers were desperate to leave, these items would cost seventy-five dollars or more.⁵

After Wyman passed through Arctic City, James Winchester arrived and described the town in more detail. According to him, the rogue who had tricked gold-seekers into

going up the Koyukuk—the man he called Dorcross—owned a dance hall in Arctic City, where three Alaska Native women and one white woman danced with increasingly inebriated stampedeers who guzzled the homebrew known in Alaska as hoochinoo or hooch.⁶ Winchester marveled that men who might have been accustomed to Mozart and waxed dance floors in some “up-town ballroom” were, after just one year in Alaska, seemingly delighted for the chance to enjoy the frontier version. As he explained,

These dancers made a grotesque appearance in their Klondike attire, with long, bushy hair and beards, waltzing the squaws around over a rough and uneven floor. Men who



would be insulted at the offer of such a drink at home, turned the hooche [hooch] down with a relish, after treating the squaw, as though it was the best. . . . I believe it cost fifty cents to dance and the same for a drink or cigar. Some of those who could not dance stood up by the bar and drank this Indian rum until they became crazed, and were ready to pick up a word or act that they counted as an insult to themselves or somebody else and fight.⁷

Winchester noted that every boat had carried into the country a barrel or more of alcoholic drink and that the newly installed Customs Officer was supposed to seize it.

Instead, the Arctic City traders were known to have “filled him up and sent him rolling home over the ice” and no illegal whiskey was ever confiscated.⁸

When Wyman returned to the *Illinois* on April 10 he found that several more members of his company had arrived while he was gone and that together they had enough manpower to begin freeing the steamboat from the ice. The company members also held a meeting during which Wyman negotiated for the freedom to spend his remaining time taking photographs rather than helping with company business. While the others chipped away at the ice, Wyman was documenting the last chapter in their grand adventure and made, by his own estimation, close to 2,000 prints to sell to other stampedeers. During

The inhabitants of Bergman gather to watch Ed Kelley knock out Jake Cox in a ring built over ice. Kelley received the \$250 purse. Anchorage Museum, Jasper N. Wyman Collection (B1989.24.199).



Men play cards at Arctic City's saloon, April 5, 1899. This Koyukuk River outpost was famous for its dance hall, electric lights, and ample supplies of alcohol. Anchorage Museum, Jasper N. Wyman Collection (B1989.24.252).



Residents of Arctic City gather for a photograph, April 23, 1899. The camp had its own electrical generator powered by wood—note the wire and light bulb hanging from the gable peak.

one picture-taking session inside a log cabin, the magnesium flash-powder he used to light the interior caught the moss chinking in the ceiling on fire, and the stampeders went from posing to extinguishing the flames. Wyman's work took a turn for the macabre when he was asked to photograph the dead body of James McGrath, a fireman from New York who had died of scurvy during the winter and had been preserved in a frozen state. Wyman turned down the job.⁹

Meanwhile, the weather was growing warmer, the rivers were beginning to thaw, and for residents of the mining camps this was cause for celebration. When Wyman returned to Bergman, he photographed the fun-loving and highly improvisational Bergman String Band with its conductor in a suit and top hat, and he also took pictures of another prize fight, this one between Edward Kelley (the winner of the previous bout) and a pugilist from Peavy.¹⁰ It was at that time that Wyman also heard of a rich gold strike on Myrtle Creek along the Middle Fork of the Koyukuk. Although he did not have much to say on the topic, a member of the *Dorothy* party named Dad Childs described the moment he heard the news:

He told me their boys had struck it rich up the middle fork of the Koyukuk on a creek called Myrtle Creek and he showed me some coarse gold which he claimed they had got up there after sinking 24 holes to bedrock, average depth 6 or 7 feet. Although he is supposed to be one of my best friends, I am like many others, [I] don't think much of the report.¹¹

Like Childs, most of the stampeders had heard glowing reports before and were

deeply skeptical, but the news was genuine and Myrtle Creek was the site that summer of the first significant gold strike on the Koyukuk drainage. However, this was not enough to convince most of the tired and frustrated Koyukuk stampeders to stay on. All they could do was think about escaping to the outside world.¹²

When Wyman returned to the *Illinois* a final time, he found more evidence of the short tempers and petty conflicts that had plagued the Galesburg-Alaska Mining & Developing Company from the beginning. He learned about one member of the company, a house-mover from Galesburg named Tomas Land, had called a miners' meeting because of a conflict over what Wyman described as "a handful of raisins, a can of tomatoes and about enough sugar to sweeten the same." Wyman judged the supplies to be worth \$1.75 and reported that Land lost the case and was painted as a thief by his companions. Three days later, there was a confrontation, or what Wyman called a "hot time in camp," between Land and Edward R. Berguson, a farmer who they all called Highboy. Wyman described the action in his diary:

Tom Land was forbidden to come into the cabin, but when dinner was called he came just the same and the consequence was when he sat down to the table [Orville] White attempted to smash a chair on him. 'Highboy' then jumped in and attempted to put him out of the house and others were ready to jump in when [James] Gault and I stepped in between and stopped the scrap. Tom did not get his dinner but got a cut over his eye where 'Highboy' hit him and he was compelled by the majority of the boys to leave the cabin.¹³



Winter Quarters
Bergman,
Alaska



SIDENOTE 9:**KNUTE ELLINGSON STRIKES RICH GROUND**

Most of the Koyukuk stampeders neither sought notoriety nor gained any. But Knute Ellingson could not avoid attracting attention because he was the first to make a major gold discovery on the upper Koyukuk River. Born in Norway, Ellingson immigrated to the United States in 1879 and arrived with the Koyukuk stampede in 1898. Once winter ended, Ellingson set out to explore Myrtle Creek, a tributary of Slate Creek on the Middle Fork near present-day Coldfoot. There he and his two partners (the group was locally known as "the Swede boys") found something marvelous once they thawed enough gravel to expose some shallow bedrock. Over the next few weeks they processed \$15,000 in gold nuggets and dust from their sluice boxes, and their discovery spurred interest in the Koyukuk that lasted for decades.



Knute Ellingson at Myrtle Creek where he became the first man to find profitable deposits of gold in Koyukuk country, 1899. U.S. Geological Survey, Frank C. Schrader (401).



Unwilling to give up, Land left the next day for Bergman to wait for a boat to take him down the Koyukuk in search of an officer to arrest all eight of his company who were in favor of forcing him out. As for the company, Wyman quipped in his diary, “Oh! The Galesburg Alaska Menagerie & Devouring Company is a continual round of pleasure! I don’t think!”¹⁴

Wyman continued his work, sometimes making hundreds of prints and stopping only to trade with a Koyukon man he called Indian Ellick who offered him a spoon fashioned from a Dall sheep horn for ten cents

worth of tobacco and a bread pan. Wyman also traveled three miles down the Alatna to a Koyukon camp and attempted to take pictures even though the women objected to sitting for photographs. Wyman wrote about the village that,

There are a lot of them camping on the ground having no tents as they traded them off when up on their hunting trip to other Indians for caribou skins as this gang of Indians failed to get much game. It is quite a picture to see them camped so,

“The Sporty Band”—An improvised orchestra prepares to play banjos, fiddles, and guitars at the trading post of Bergman, April 2, 1899. University of Alaska Fairbanks Archives, David M. Hopkins Papers (1958-51-1).

F. Pickart's Store - To

ATMORE'S
MINCE MEAT

471

Bergman Alaska



Apr: 2-1899.



An Alaska Native family and white stampedeers wait for spring to arrive and the moment when they can free the *Sunflower* from the ice, May 8, 1899. Note the semi-subterranean cabin and the log cribbing that protects the steamboat. Anchorage Museum, Jasper N. Wyman Collection (B1989.24.310).

cooking fish, with their skins, and loads of fish around them.¹⁵

Finally, on May 19, both the villagers and the stampedeers heard the unmistakable roar of the ice breaking up. Soon the last of the Galesburg company arrived from West Beaver and began loading the *Illinois* for departure. And in a scene repeated throughout Koyukuk country, they began tearing down any cabins within a convenient distance to cut the logs into firewood for fueling the steamboat. On May 25 the *Illinois* was ready to go, but the river channel was still blocked by an ice jam just downriver. Nearby the *North Star* was also ready to sail, so the men from both ves-

sels spent a day breaking up the ice. It was nearly noon the next day before the river was cleared enough to let the boats through, but they were finally on the move. Thirteen months had passed since Wyman and his fellow Illinoisans began this journey, and most of them were delighted to be starting the homeward leg of what had turned out to be a disappointing trip. Wyman however was suffering from a bad case of déjà vu. In his diary, he wrote, "Well, this is h[ell] once more. Steamboating is just the same as ever."¹⁶

During their first day out the *Illinois* suffered a broken rudder, landed on two sandbars, and blew a gasket in the engine. The next day was no better. They had not



A stamperder from the steamboat *Jennie M.* (left with pipe) poses with a Koyukon Athabaskan family, 1899. The father of the family worked aboard the vessel and may have been the navigator for the journey from the Koyukuk to the Yukon River. University of Alaska Fairbanks Archives, Alaska Historical Society Photograph Collection (1976-41-100).

yet reached Bergman and had landed on their fourth sandbar when some of the men decided they did not like the company's boat captain, Frederick Wall of Moline, Illinois. Instead they voted Wyman to be the new captain, a decision Wyman questioned in his diary: "Whether the boys respect me and thought they were honoring or whether they were desirous of getting revenge by putting a curse on me I don't know . . ."¹⁷ In spite of his doubts, Wyman adopted a policy of full-steam-ahead and managed to reach Bergman and Arctic City even though Wall tried to interfere by pulling the bell cord signaling a full-stop. Wyman was having none of it, and later wrote, "I cautioned the Captain not to monkey with the bell cord while I was at the wheel any more." Reasoning that he

could sail clean over most shallow spots in the river, Wyman continued his aggressive approach to navigation even in the face of protests:

Captain Wall cusses considerable because the firemen keep on lots of steam and . . . [he] says there is no d[amn] sense in it, and I tell the firemen to keep the steam right up to the top notch and I tell the engineers . . . to give me all they have got and I send her along at a merry clip and tell the boys that the new rope they bought at Bergman, if we need it we will want it bad, for if I hit a bar I am apt to hit it hard and go high.¹⁸

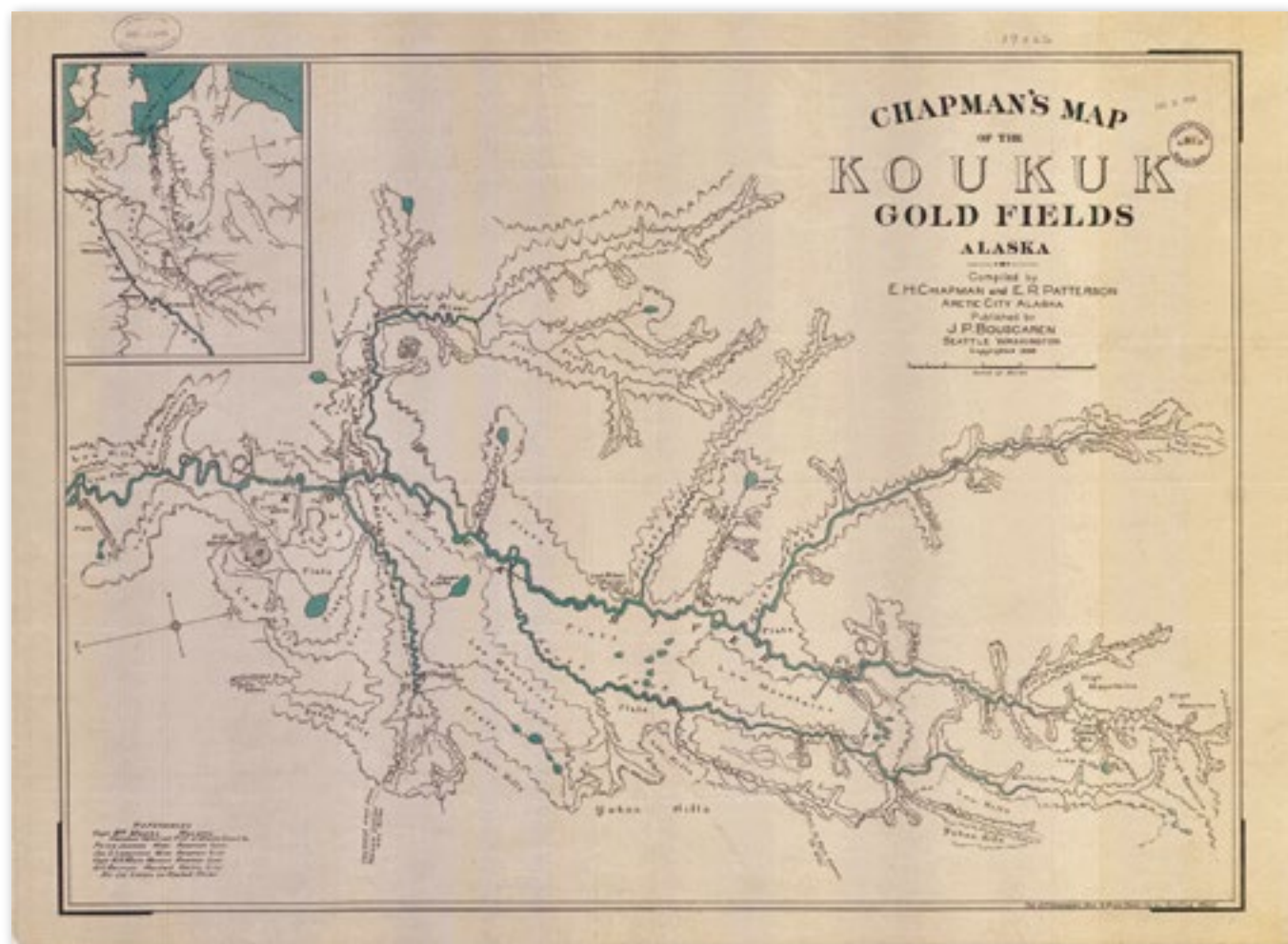
Two men watch as the ice begins to fracture and flow out of the Alatna River (called Allenkaket at the time), May 21, 1899. This was the moment so many Koyukuk stampeders yearned for when they could leave their northern exile and return to family and friends. University of Alaska Fairbanks Archives, Jasper N. Wyman Album (1984-115-9).



On the bow, men took depth soundings with a weighted rope equipped with knots, and when they sang out “three feet of water,” the same depth as the *Illinois*’ hull, Wyman said, “I stop breathing till all is safe again.”¹⁹ Along the way the boat passed Koyukon graves and abandoned cabins at Red Mountain and the Hogatza River, and the men occasionally went to shore to hunt for caribou. After eleven days they reached the Yukon River, a journey that had taken them a full twenty days when they were going the other direction. Six miles below the mouth of the Koyukuk, Wyman moored the *Illinois* at the Koyukuk trading post where Charles Pickarts still maintained a store and warehouse in one building and his living quarters in a separate log cabin. Here the men rushed to pick up their mail which was sorted alphabetically in a box on the store counter, and Wyman was delighted to receive

six from his mother and sisters. No longer feeling as much urgency about leaving, the men agreed to sail back to the mouth of the Koyukuk where Wyman and a banker named Arthur Anderson climbed an 800-foot cliff to take photographs of the confluence of the two rivers. Over the previous days, the *Illinois* had passed fifteen other ships and more were slipping down the Yukon River every hour. Wyman knew this was evidence that the Koyukuk and indeed all of Alaska’s new mining districts were emptying as rapidly as they had filled a year before.²⁰

On their way down the Yukon, the Illinoisans stopped briefly at the tiny community of Grayling and then at Anvik before reaching Holy Cross, where they learned the Jesuit priests had repaired the company’s small steamer *Silver Wave* to transport cargo barges farther down the Yukon River to the settlement of Andreafsky. Wyman



and his companions settled accounts with the priests for storage of provisions, made the decision to leave the steamer behind, and agreed to take nine paying passengers aboard the *Illinois*. By the time they reached Andreafsky, five more members of the company had resigned because they wanted to try their luck in the Klondike gold fields. Among that group was company secretary Claus Rodine, who wrote in a letter to his wife that he felt “a little out of order” at leaving but concluded, “The Illinois Co. of Galesburg practically is no more.”²¹ The company was quickly unravel-

ing, and this bothered Wyman who was also tempted to leave. Instead he stayed on to deal with the problems of finding wood to fuel the *Illinois* and avoiding a seemingly endless series of sandbars and dead-end channels. Wyman reported that he rescued a “fine water spaniel dog” that swam out from the shore (undoubtedly lost from another stampeder vessel) and that wind and fog near the mouth of the Yukon made navigation increasingly dangerous. He wrote, “The river is up considerable and in many places it is several miles wide and one of the most treacherous rivers on the globe.”²²

Ernest H. Chapman's 1899 map of the Koyukuk gold fields is more geographically accurate than previous efforts, but it only locates Arctic City and Tramway Bar and none of the other mining camps that sprang up during the stampede. Library of Congress.

SIDENOTE 10:

MINING MACHINERY ON THE KOYUKUK IS A BUST

I left all the dredging machinery up the Koyukuk. We would have been better off if we had left it in Portland. I can say as a dredging proposition it is a decided success as a failure.

—Captain R.J. Young, June 27, 1899

Many of the steamboats on the Koyukuk River in 1898 were equipped with “gold-saving devices” intended to turn steamboats into improvised gold dredges. Suction pumps, sluice boxes, and other gear were supposed to suck sand and gravel from streambeds and separate the gold. The Galesburg-Alaska Mining & Developing Company spent money on such equipment as did the men who owned the *Alaska Union* and the *Lavelle Young*. Unfortunately for the stampeder, these rigs were poorly designed and ill-suited for the conditions—and when spring arrived this gadgetry was the first thing they dumped overboard to lighten the load. As one Koyukuk veteran recalled, “All kinds of outfits came in that year. There were steamboats galore, loaded down with worthless machinery in the shape of dredges and all kinds of machinery for thawing frozen ground, drilling into glaciers, etc., etc.”



The *Alaska Union* equipped with pumps and sluices meant to speed up the process of separating gold from gravel, 1898. University of Alaska Fairbanks Archives, Charles Harris Papers (1967-71-26)



To Wyman's great relief, on June 21, less than a month after leaving their camp on the Alatna River, the *Illinois* arrived at St. Michael. The place was bustling with activity as miners arrived from the Klondike and locations across Alaska as well as from Seattle, San Francisco, and other west coast ports. Word of a big gold strike at Cape Nome, on the north side of Norton Sound, had brought prospectors pouring in, which worked to the advantage of the *Illinois* group because they wanted to dispose of their equipment and provisions. Wyman was selected as broker and over the next weeks he sold the company's outfit at about thirty percent above Seattle prices. He also sold goods for others on a commission basis. At the same time, whaling vessels were arriving at St. Michael

and unloading furs and ivory the whalers obtained during their travels and Inupiaq men from Norton Sound sold ivory carvings and fur clothing. This Wyman could not resist, so when he was not selling provisions, he was buying mementos—first a black bear hide and ivory figurines and then a walrus tusk he asked local carvers to turn into a cribbage board.²³ While Wyman was occupied with company business, his friend Norman Aldrich became very sick, and after a week without improvement Wyman decided to take him on a stretcher to St. Michael's modest hospital where he would be cared for at a rate of fifty cents a day. When he did not improve, Wyman paid for a berth for Aldrich aboard the steamship *Roanoke* bound for Seattle. Wyman gave his friend fifty dollars and

The *Illinois* (left) uses a steel cable to pull the *Jennie M.* off of a sandbar along the Alatna River, May 27, 1899. Anchorage Museum, Jasper N. Wyman Collection (B1989.24.320).

Jasper Wyman photographs the Illinois banker Arthur Anderson and one of the company dogs as they gaze from a cliff at the Koyukuk-Yukon confluence, June 7, 1899. University of Alaska Fairbanks Archives, Jasper N. Wyman Album (1984-115-13).



extra clothes and promised to sell Aldrich's shotgun and to draw his dividend from the company on his behalf.²⁴

While Wyman did his work and said farewell to his friend, the stampeders who had recently fled the Koyukuk were departing St. Michael in all directions. Some were using whatever cash they had to pay for passage home; others were determined to stay in Alaska and continue their search for their own personal Eldorado. One sure way to reach the Klondike and make money along the way was to sign on with the Alaska Commercial Company as deckhands on Yukon River steamboats or as "firemen" feeding wood and coal into a steamboat's engine. Many former Koyukukers (as they were called) did this or worked for the company in St. Michael lightering cargo in and out of the harbor until they could afford passage to their destina-

tion. The news from Nome was tempting, but while Wyman was wandering St. Michael's muddy streets he got some advice from a trusted source. "I met Joe Mathews, my Koyukuk friend, who has just arrived from Cape Nome," explained Wyman, "and he says 'Jap, it is just a bluff. There is gold there, but the reports are greatly exaggerated and the hardships are beyond the richness.'" ²⁵ Unlike Wyman, who was still a bachelor, others had an even more difficult decision to make because they had families to support and loved ones who had not seen them in over a year. Although he left the Galesburg-Alaska Mining & Developing Company, Claus Rodine remained uncertain about his future, and wrote to his wife,

I do not know what I will do, but
I think I will go back to the states



within a few months unless something turns up where I can make it pay, but it will have to pay pretty big in order to induce me to stay here another winter. . . . I am so well aware that I left both you and Clara a great burden to take care of, but if I see a chance here to make it up this winter I will probably remain, but the chances are slim unless there is gold found at Camp Nome, which is only a couple of days sailing from here.²⁶

Meanwhile, St. Michael was filling with the diseased and desperate. Of the one hundred miners who had spent the winter at Cape Nome, at least eighteen developed severe cases of scurvy and had to be evacuated by dog sled to St. Michael for medical treatment, and an even greater number of stricken men were arriving from the Koyukuk and from the Kobuk River and Kotzebue Sound area. There were so many cases of illness that the government station at St. Michael was besieged with “piteous appeals for aid,” and the U.S.

Members of the Galesburg-Alaska Mining & Developing Company load cord wood aboard the *Illinois* during their return to St. Michael, June 14, 1899. Anchorage Museum, Jasper N. Wyman Collection (B1989.24.335).

Revenue Cutter Service ship *Bear* began taking the sickest men out of Alaska for no charge.²⁷ As the *San Francisco Call* explained,

St. Michael is at present the har-binger for hundreds of poor un-fortunates who have drifted down the Yukon River with nothing with which to provide even the ordinary necessities of life . . . This state of affairs is likely to continue all summer, as rude, improvised craft from various river points

drift into the harbor every day with stranded men.²⁸

As Wyman walked past tents full of diseased men and within view of the mortuary filled with coffins, he counted himself lucky. He had been able to sell the *Illinois* to the Alaska Commercial Company when dozens of other boats from the Koyukuk lined the beaches abandoned and neglected. And he had saved enough money to send his sick friend home and then a week later to leave himself aboard a steam freighter headed for Seattle.²⁹

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Jasper N. Wyman diary, March 22, 1899, Anchorage Museum, Wyman Collection.
- ² James D. Winchester, *Capt. J.D. Winchester's Experience on a Voyage from Lynn, Massachusetts, to San Francisco, Cal., and to the Alaskan Gold Fields* (Newcomb & Gauss, 1900), 229.
- ³ Wyman diary, March 27, 1899.
- ⁴ Wyman diary, April 6, 1899; Aurlette Ingman, "Gold Dust," (1938), 135, based on Jasper N. Wyman's diary, Wyman Collection, Anchorage Museum; Jasper N. Wyman, *Journey to the Koyukuk: The Photos of J.N. Wyman, 1898-1899* (Missoula, MT: Pictorials Histories Publishing Company, 1988), 66.
- ⁵ Wyman diary, April 4-6, 1899.
- ⁶ See, Thayne I. Anderson, *Alaska Hooch: The History of Alcohol in Early Alaska* (self-published, 1988).
- ⁷ Winchester, *J.D. Winchester's Experience*, 231-232.
- ⁸ Ibid.
- ⁹ Wyman diary, April 17, 1899.
- ¹⁰ Wyman diary, April 20-25, 1899.
- ¹¹ Wyman diary, April 21, 1899.
- ¹² "The Koyukuk Gold," *Seattle Daily Times*, May 24, 1900, 8.
- ¹³ Wyman diary, May 3, 1899.
- ¹⁴ Wyman diary May 6-10, 1899.
- ¹⁵ Wyman diary, May 10-11, 1899.
- ¹⁶ Wyman diary, May 26, 1899.
- ¹⁷ Ibid.
- ¹⁸ Wyman diary, May 31, 1899.
- ¹⁹ Wyman diary, June 1, 1899.
- ²⁰ Wyman diary, June 7, 1899; Claus Rodine letter, July 1, 1899.
- ²¹ Claus Rodine, letter to his wife from St. Michael, July 1, 1899, Alaska State Library, Papers of Claus Rodine (MS-134).
- ²² Wyman diary, June 15, 1899.
- ²³ Wyman diary, June 26-30, 1899.
- ²⁴ Wyman diary, July 4, 1899.
- ²⁵ Wyman diary, July 7, 1899.
- ²⁶ Rodine letter, July 1, 1899.
- ²⁷ "Stories of Strikes Brought by Men from Cape Nome," *Los Angeles Herald*, July 15, 1899, 5; "Hungry Miners at St. Michael," *San Francisco Call*, July 18, 1899, 11; "Rescue of the Gold Hunters," *San Francisco Call*, August 25, 1899, 8.
- ²⁸ "Hungry Miners at St. Michael," *San Francisco Call*, July 18, 1899, 11.
- ²⁹ "Exodus to Big Salmon River," *San Francisco Call*, July 20, 1899, 7; "Steamers for Sale," *Los Angeles Times*, July 24, 1899, 1; "Bodies Brought Home," *Los Angeles Herald*, July 28, 1899, 2; Wyman diary, July 11, 1899.



Along the North Fork of the
Koyukuk River, 2014. Courtesy of
Ken Hill, National Park Service.

Chapter 6: After the Stampede—The Koyukuk’s Potential Reassessed

None need to go there except those who have courage, perseverance and endurance. None but those who dare to venture; none but those who are determined, strong and able-bodied men should venture into that region.

—Seattle Daily Times, July 18, 1899

The frenzied exodus from the Koyukuk in spring 1899 left the area’s reputation badly bruised. Bedraggled stampedeers at St. Michael were telling stories of disease and misery, and by July, men arrived daily in Seattle and San Francisco announcing that the Koyukuk was a barren land. The spokesman of a group from Syracuse, New York told a reporter in Seattle, “colors could be found almost anywhere, but there was no pay streak that they could find. No nuggets could be found the size of a pinhead.”¹ Claus Rodine from the *Illinois* group expressed much the same in a letter to his wife and referred to the thin flakes miners called “float gold”:

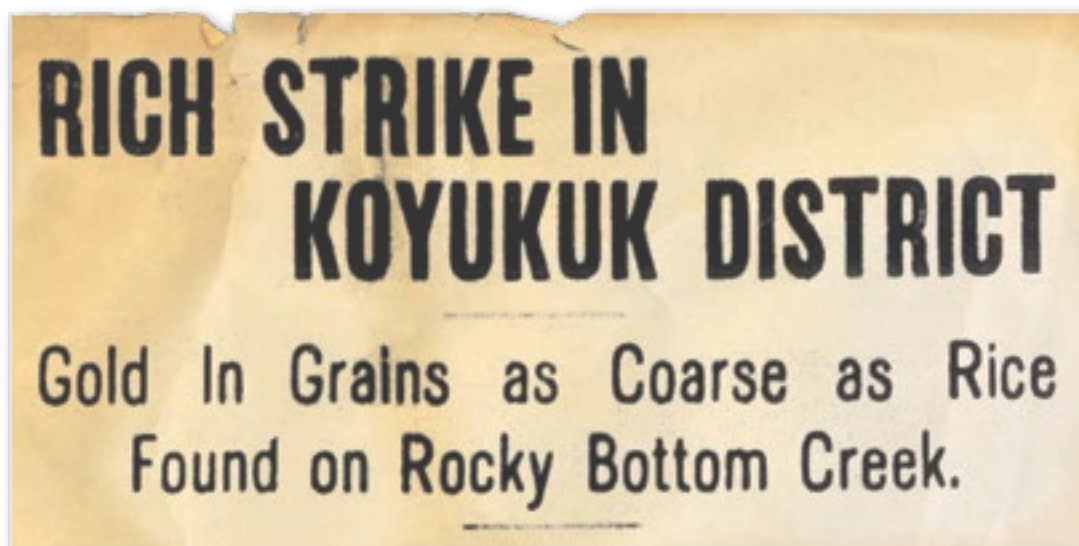
You may think it strange but it is a fact that with all the men and boats that wind up in the Koyukuk River, I do not think there was scarcely a dollar in gold found. . . . There were probably several thousand holes sunk in the creeks in the mountains [and] wherever they would sink they would find colors of gold. I have known 150 colors to be found in a pan that you could count with the

eye but all float gold and would not pay to sluice.²

Stampedeers who had spent the winter in upper Koyukuk camps like Soo City, Union City, and Jimtown, or the Alatna River camps of Rapid City, Beaver City, and West Beaver felt defeated by the realization that they had chosen their destination in Alaska’s Far North based on wild rumors. Others, like Captain James Winchester, thought they saw a conspiracy led by steamship companies to dupe men out of their money and then, after the stampede, to ignore the protests of what Winchester called “the poor, deluded wretch who had faced the hardships of the Arctic winter.” He attributed these tactics to the Koyukuk boosters and gold rush promoters in general, concluding,

Thus was the rascally deception practiced by these steamboat companies, which should not be allowed to entice people with their gilded delusions to pay them a big price for a passage in, a big price at their warehouses for provisions, and the United States government pay that

This headline and others like it assured that the Koyukuk region would remain in the minds of gold prospectors after the brief but exciting stampede. *Seattle Star*, September 27, 1899.



same company a big price to take them back to the States, broken in health as well as pocket.³

Even so, some encouraging reports were emerging from the Koyukuk, reports that called into question what seemed to be an unending litany of woe. George Kyle of Boston, who helped to establish the new Arctic City, had departed in the spring but soon received letters from his companions who stayed in the Koyukuk saying that they had discovered “gold as coarse as rice” on Rocky Bottom Creek and that he should join them without delay. Another man spoke to the *Nome News* and said he talked with a steamboat captain who claimed the Klondike was a “grubstake country compared with the Koyukuk.”⁴ Of the original two thousand or so Koyukuk stampedeers, only about sixty had chosen to stay, but some mining companies planned to return to the Koyukuk because they believed it still held promise. A group of fifteen Koyukuk veterans from Iowa told the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* they were headed north with a two-year outfit that cost them \$10,000 and

that their steel-hulled river steamer would be assembled in St. Michael. One man stated that the Koyukuk was “ideal ground for the prospector” and declared, “There is no doubt in my mind but that the Koyukuk country will prove to be a wonder.”⁵

In mid-July 1899 a miner named John Abramson wrote to the *Seattle Daily Times* because he was upset by an article called “The Koyukuk Failure” written by an Associated Press correspondent. According to Abramson, he and four partners discovered gold on the Alatna River in 1896 and staked multiple mining claims. He also mentioned an Alatna tributary he named Rapid Creek, which appears to be the reason later stampedeers named their camp near that location Rapid City. Abramson was indignant that anyone would disparage the area and wrote,

I must say your correspondent has probably received his information from some tenderfoot, who, after getting part way up the Allenkaket River [Alatna], grew faint of heart and turned about and came home,



not having the moral courage to face the hardships incident to a miner's life in Alaska. There have been many such started to seek their fortunes in the frozen gold mines of the Arctic regions and failed. None need to go there except those who have courage, perseverance and endurance. None but those who dare to venture; none but those who are determined, strong and able-bodied men should venture into that region.⁶

Gordon Bettles, the first man to campaign in favor of the Koyukuk, was also sanguine and

continued his ceaseless boosting. During the 1898-1899 stampede, he was already making plans to relocate his Bergman operation farther north to be closer to the gold-producing streams. And he told anyone who would listen his theory that a wide "belt of gold" lay across the Koyukuk headwaters and that if prospectors could locate that belt they would follow it to a bonanza. Bettles remained an influential man in the region, and as one believer wrote,

To Gordon C. Bettles, of the firm of Pickarts, Bettles & Pickarts, outfitters at Bergman, is due the credit of what is now pretty generally considered

A Koyukon family at a village near Huslia River 195 miles up the Koyukuk River, 1899. U.S. Geological Survey, F.C. Schrader (497).

to be the correct theory of the gold belt. . . . He has implicit confidence in the country and more than one man whose feet began to get cold, as they say here when a man gets discouraged and leaves the country, was inspired by Mr. Bettles to again try to find the 'right place.'⁷

In August 1899 Frank C. Schrader of the U.S. Geological Survey arrived in Koyukuk country to provide a more sober and professional assessment. Schrader's superiors had launched a series of scientific investigations of Alaska's mineral potential in the wake of the Klondike-Alaska gold rush, and the agency endeavored to help gold prospectors with maps and mineral reports. Schrader and his topographer Thomas Gardiner traveled up the Chandalar River and west to the upper Koyukuk before following the John River north to the Arctic Slope and beyond. They produced a map showing all of the previous year's gold camps and trading posts and reported seeing seventy-five men in the Koyukuk, most of whom were mining on the Middle Fork about sixteen miles north of Tramway Bar at Slate Creek and Myrtle Creek. When it came time for his findings, Schrader wrote,

There is no doubt of the enthusiasm of the miners over their strike. They claim that they have discovered a gold region which will far outstrip the Klondike in the richness of its output, and they say they would not take millions for their claims as they stand today. How far they are warranted in this I am not able to say. . . . they have only scratched it as yet, and its possibilities as a great gold mining region remain to be told in the future.⁸

In his report, Schrader mentioned that gold had been discovered in paying quantities on Slate Creek, but he offered little detail.⁹ Fortunately the story was captured in an interview with Donald McKenzie, a Koyukuk stamper who recounted how in April 1899 three men led by Knute Ellingson decided to try their luck in Koyukuk country. As he explained,

They were not bar or surface miners, but understood the modern way of prospecting in Alaska. They went up Myrtle creek to a place where the slate and mica bedrock came to the surface. Here they commenced burning, and in a few hours loosened enough of the rock to show that it was rich in gold.¹⁰

After making their discovery, Ellingson and his partners kept quiet. Often miners were secretive because they did not want to become victims of "claim jumping" when others swooped in to usurp promising ground and establish competing mineral claims. In this case, the three miners were themselves trespassing, and they wanted time for the claim-owner to leave the Koyukuk for the season.

After Ellingson and his partners began work, four men from Maine arrived on Myrtle Creek. They had come north during the stampede the previous year on the steamboat *Wilbur Crimmin*, and within a few feet of the surface they also found gold and chose to keep their own counsel rather than informing their neighbors of the discovery. Both Ellingson's men and the *Crimmin* group waited until the temperatures rose and break-up arrived before they dammed Myrtle Creek and constructed sluice boxes. As they expected, the gold was plentiful. After two weeks of



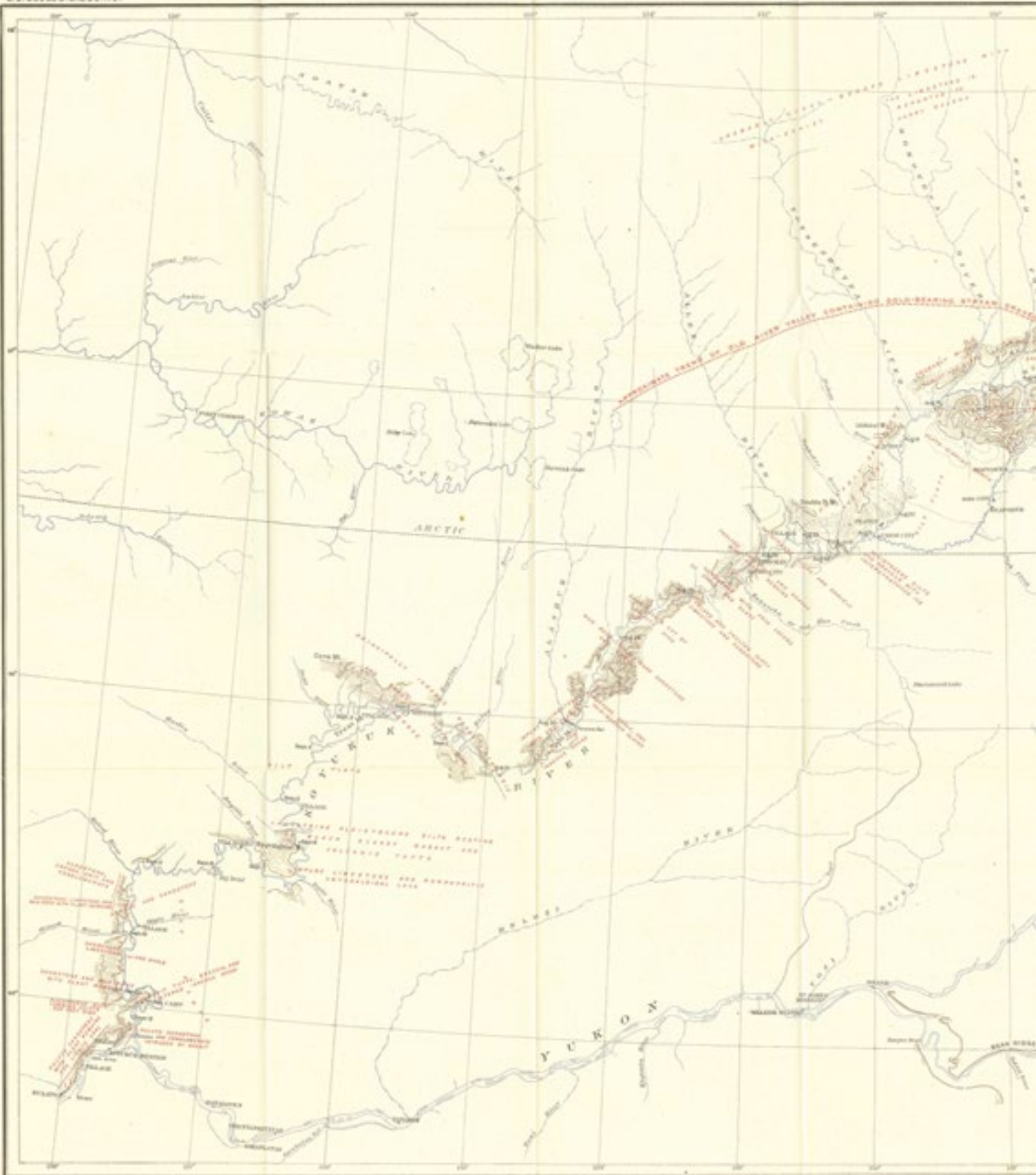
work, the *Crimmin* party tore up their sluice boxes and traveled downriver to Peavy where they reported that they had found nothing. However, because they had plenty of gold to buy an outfit and then headed north in a hurry, their activities aroused the suspicions of several Peavy residents.

Soon curious miners were visiting Myrtle Creek on a regular basis and trying to figure out if the creek was producing gold, but whenever they approached Ellingson's operation the men stopped working to conceal their success. This ruse did not last long, however. On one occasion a miner dropped in just as they were cleaning up the sluices and was surprised to see Ellingson holding a prospecting pan full of gold nuggets. This news began to leak quickly, and although the popu-

lation of miners in the Koyukuk was widely scattered, sooner or later they all heard about the discovery and tried to obtain a claim on Myrtle Creek or other creeks in the vicinity. It was difficult to know precisely how much gold Ellingson and his partners excavated, but Schrader reported they averaged each day between \$50 and \$80 per man and that in the two weeks before the government geologists arrived they had taken out \$15,000.¹¹

Meanwhile, Ellingson and his partners were in a bind. They had run out of food and none of the other miners in the area were willing to travel 140 miles to Bergman and back to resupply them—they were all too busy trying to dig up their own fortunes. Determined not to waste a minute, Ellingson and the other two men worked until their

Knute Ellingson and his two partners, known locally as "the Swede boys," at their sluicing operation on Myrtle Creek near the Koyukuk Middle Fork, 1899. Theirs was the first major gold discovery in the region. U.S. Geological Survey, F.C. Schrader (407).



MAP OF PORTIONS OF KORYUK AND CHANDLAR RIVERS WITH GEOLOGIC NOTES

F. C. SCHMIDT, GEOLOGIST
TOPOGRAPHY BY T. S. GEORGE
1899

Scale 1:50,000

Distance (meters) approximately 100 feet

Intermediate contours of 100 feet are shown by dotted lines

Shaded in black and blue Shaded in red

Contours which have been measured

Contours not been measured



SIDENOTE 11:

JASPER WYMAN AND LIFE AFTER THE KOYUKUK

They are all anxious for pictures, and you may bet I am getting my work in for 'dear life.' I give them a great breeze about my sending them one of my catalogs and swell up a little so as to impress them that I AM THE MAN.

—Jasper Wyman's last diary entry in Alaska, July 16, 1899

When the Koyukuk stampede ended, most gold-seekers either tried their luck in Nome or returned home to pick up their lives where they left off. When Jasper Wyman landed in Seattle after his Alaska adventure, he boarded a train to see his family in Illinois but did not stay long. He soon relocated to Colorado where he established a ranch for breeding cattle, mules, and horses. He also marketed his Alaska photographs to other veterans of the Koyukuk stampede. Inside his catalog he suggested, "This is something that will be very nice to have—some choice pictures such as your artic [sic] cabin home, or dog team, or yourself pulling a sled on the trail prospecting, or some canyon picture, or camping." In spite of his talent, Wyman's work was never celebrated like that of the Klondike-Alaska gold rush photographers Eric A. Hegg, H.J. Goetzman, or Asahel Curtis. Instead he became famous for producing thoroughbred horses that won consistently in the 1920s on race tracks in the United States and Mexico. Jasper Wyman died in 1939 in Meeker, Colorado at the age of seventy.



Jasper Wyman
self-portrait
at his camp
on the Alatna
River, October
13, 1898.
Anchorage
Museum, Jasper
N. Wyman
Collection

Jasper Wyman portrait, ca. 1895.
University of Alaska Fairbanks,
Jasper N. Wyman Photograph
Album (1984-115-25).





This 1900 map shows a "gold belt" crossing the upper Koyukuk, but the geology of gold is never that predictable. The map also shows "Clow" at the location that would soon become "Bettles," the most northerly of Gordon C. Bettles' trading posts. *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, April 18, 1900.



last sack of flour was gone and then hurriedly removed their sluice boxes from the creek and headed south where they would spend two thousand dollars on supplies at Pickarts, Bettles & Pickarts store in Bergman. Once the Ellingson group left Myrtle Creek, Donald McKenzie and other miners in the area closed in to assess the quality of the ground the men had been working. McKenzie wrote, “The sluice boxes were roughly made out of whip-sawed lumber and not less than \$200 could be seen in the cracks. One gentleman picked up a \$2 nugget from the bedrock.”¹² There is no record of whether “the Swede boys” faced consequences when the true Myrtle Creek claim-holder returned, but Ellingson did continue mining in the upper Koyukuk region for the next three decades.

News of this gold discovery caused a minor stampede, and prospectors rushed in to begin staking claims not only on Myrtle Creek but also on Twelve-Mile, Porcupine, Winnie, and Alder Creeks. Branches of the upper Koyukuk like Wild River, John River and the Alatna also received new attention. These areas had all been staked at the height of the 1898 stampede, but because few claimants returned to do the required assessment work, the ground was available again. Although many of these second-wave prospectors left the upper Koyukuk before the winter of 1899-1900 set in, the new discoveries were enough to attract entrepreneurs who wanted to supply the miners who remained. When Robert D. Menzie opened a store to serve the miners on Myrtle Creek, a town

A mining camp with a cabin, tents and horses at the mouth of Slate Creek, 1899. Within two years the town of Coldfoot grew near this site. University of Washington, Eric A. Hegg Photographs (1162).



The town of Coldfoot emerging as a supply center for miners on Slate Creek, Myrtle Creek, and beyond, 1902. Courtesy of George Lounsbury.

began to take shape, prompting an observer to note,

At the mouth of Myrtle Creek, which flows into Slate, is located the new town of Coldfoot City, with a population of 300 people. On Myrtle creek seven claims are being worked, employing fifty miners and five of these claims are producing from \$20 to \$40 per day to the man. Wages are \$15 per day on this creek.¹³

Farther south, near the confluence of the Koyukuk and the John River, Gordon Bettles established yet another of his "bean shops" in cooperation with Charles Clow, a miner who had been on the scene since 1898. Bettles wanted to call the new outpost "Clow" (the name appeared on one map of the era), but just as Bettles was preparing to establish the townsite, a war of words broke out between Clow, who stated publicly that over \$1,000,000 in gold would be harvested on the Koyukuk, and a writer in the *Nome Gold Digger* who declared such statements

“criminal” and the “basest of falsehoods.” This anonymous critic went on to say that Clow was “a well-known character on the upper Koyukuk river and does not bear an enviable reputation” and accused him of lying to cause a rush that would help him “slough off” worthless mining claims to his friends for a profit. The impassioned letter concluded,

It is such reports as he has given out which cause the stampedes to Alaska, and suffering and breaking up of homes are only a few of the results to ensue. Outside newspapers are not altogether to blame for it, but they should not be too eager to listen to every plausible fellow who comes about the office, fairly bubbling over with news, snapping his fingers, and then asks you to have a cigar.¹⁴

Soon Clow left Alaska and Bettles ended up naming the new town after himself.

In two years much had changed along the river. Coldfoot and Bettles were now emerging as the primary supply depots for miners working farther north, and most of the trading posts and mining camps established during the heady days of the Koyukuk River stampede were abandoned. In June 1900, Bernard Camden, a 30-year-old second lieutenant in the Revenue Cutter Service, ascended the Koyukuk aboard the *Leah* as part of a larger reconnaissance mission, and his report provides a snapshot of the Koyukuk at that time. Along most of the river's length, Lt. Camden saw only one other steamboat and he noted that wood resupplying stations were few and far between. From the deck of his steamboat, he spotted sluice boxes at Hughes Bar and near Red Mountain, but the camps appeared to be abandoned. And when he reached Arctic City, he reported, “The camp

is now deserted; its departed glory and prosperous days are only attested by an array of 14 deserted cabins of fair size and structure.”¹⁵

Two hours later and five miles farther north the ship reached Bergman. Camden estimated the population at the trading post was fifteen whites and one hundred Alaska Natives. The steamboats *Victoria* and *Edith M. Kyle* were tied up to the bank and the latter was out of commission—the Pickarts brothers had purchased the vessel and were planning to cannibalize the engine and other parts to build mining equipment. Because the captain of the *Victoria* had business to attend to farther north, the vessel joined the *Leah* on the journey toward Peavy. While the ships were taking on wood at the junction of the Middle and South Forks, Camden hiked about two miles to visit the deserted ruins of Union City. And later, when the vessels reached Peavy, he found the place had only one permanent resident. Camden wrote in his report, “The camp, consisting of some 15 to 20 cabins, is deserted with the exception of the land office, which is occupied by Mr. Rose, the land commissioner.”¹⁶

The captain of the *Leah*, Harry Young, had intended to navigate all the way to Bettles, but north of Peavy the river narrowed and offered short, sharp bends that landed both the *Leah* and *Victoria* on sand bars. At this point Captain Young notified his passengers that they needed to disembark and that their effects and 160 tons of provisions would be unloaded on the riverbank where the vessel was stranded. And in a scene reminiscent of the 1898 stampede, the passengers erected tents and by the next day, Camden observed, “quite a village was standing on the shore.” The men called this camp Young's City in recognition of Captain Young's skill in traveling as far north as he did—many of the men had not even expected to reach Bergman. From

SIDENOTE 12:

THE RISE AND FALL OF OLD BETTLES

Gordon C. Bettles was a one-man advertising campaign for the Koyukuk River, and he believed prosperity would come when miners no longer needed to travel as far to resupply. After establishing stores at Arctic City (1893) and Bergman (1898), he was ready to plant his flag far above the Arctic Circle. In 1899 he ordered enough supplies for a thousand men and opened a store 600 miles up the Koyukuk on a bend just south of the John River. But by the following year, gold fever had cooled considerably, and Bettles quickly sold his interest in the enterprise to the Alaska Commercial Company—even so, the town he founded kept his name.

The store at Bettles sold groceries, hardware, dry goods, and “gent’s furnishings”—and the customers all paid with gold dust. Motorized vessels had trouble traveling north of Bettles because of shallow water, so horses pulled river scows loaded with goods to mines on the Middle and North Forks. Bags of gold going south were stowed in stout wooden boxes equipped with long ropes and floats—in case of shipwreck the floats could be seen and the boxes retrieved. By the 1930s the population of this northerly outpost had dwindled, and today river travelers still visit the store building and old log cabins in what is known locally as Old Bettles.



The trading post of Bettles along the Koyukuk just south of the John River confluence, 1900. U.S. Geological Survey, F.C. Schrader (808).



this tent city on the beach, the miners would have to use poling boats to reach their mining claims about seventy-five miles to the north. As it happens, Gordon Bettles was at his newly established trading post a few miles farther up the Koyukuk River when he soon heard about the huge pile of provisions stashed on the riverbank. Never one to pass up an opportunity, he informed Captain Young and Lt. Camden that his post was critically short of supplies and he predicted that if he ran out entirely this might lead to an exodus of miners within two weeks. On the strength of his argument, he received special permission from Lt. Camden to buy the lot and relay the *Leah*'s off-loaded cargo

to Bettles. Five days after the *Leah* was grounded, the river rose two feet and the steamboat was able to return downstream. Along the way, Camden noted that of the five vessels on the river, only three were functional and only one—the *City of Paris* owned by the Alaska Commercial Company—was regularly operating on the river.¹⁷

Camden's report highlighted the greatest obstacle to gold mining on the Koyukuk—the scarcity of food and other supplies. The cost to the Alaska Commercial Company of shipping provisions to the trading post of Bettles, for example, made flour, bacon, and other necessities prohibitively expensive, and they still needed to be transported another

The Bergman store surrounded by log cabins, a canvas covered structure, and the salvaged hull of the steamboat *Fulton*, August 26, 1899. Founded in large part by Gordon Bettles, this northern outpost survived for a number of years after the Koyukuk River stampede. U.S. Geological Survey, F.C. Schrader (453).

Horses pull a scow used for hauling up to ten tons of cargo from Bettles to Coldfoot and Nolan Creek, July 25, 1909. U.S. Geological Survey, A.G. Maddren (20).



75 or 100 miles by the miner to his camp. This difficult reality led the *Daily Klondike Nugget* to warn, “Persons who contemplate the trip to Koyukuk should bear in mind the fact that unless they take their own provisions with them they will be in line for starvation, no matter how plentiful the gold may be.”¹⁸ Compared to their peers in more southerly districts and along major rivers, miners on the upper Koyukuk led Spartan lives, and the piecemeal relaying of supplies up ever shallower streams was repeated each year, and every mile of additional haulage whittled away the net value of gold extracted.¹⁹

During the early days of the Koyukuk River gold stampede, optimistic prospectors had petitioned the United States government to create what was called the Peavy Land District with an office staffed by a commissioner in the tiny hamlet of

Peavy. President William McKinley signed this designation into law on February 14, 1899, but within a year the district was under threat. By 1900 most of the miners from the Koyukuk had left for home or were rushing to gold discoveries on the Seward Peninsula. As a result, the land offices in both Peavy and Circle City were scheduled to be “abolished” and relocated to Nome. One critic of the new land district wrote, “There is not more than six or seven men within 20 miles of Peavy . . . and I see no reason why the land office there should not be discontinued, as it will be many years before there will be any more need of one.”²⁰ Debate over the Koyukuk’s potential would continue and a handful of determined miners would pull gold from Koyukuk gravels, but the heady days of the stampede were clearly finished.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ “Colors Found Everywhere,” *Los Angeles Times*, July 19, 1899, 2; “Disappointed Miners,” *Los Angeles Herald*, July 19, 1899, 1.
- ² Claus Rodine, letter to his wife from St. Michael, July 1, 1899, Alaska State Library, Papers of Claus Rodine (MS-134).
- ³ James D. Winchester, *Capt. J.D. Winchester’s Experience on a Voyage from Lynn, Massachusetts, to San Francisco, Cal., and to the Alaskan Gold Fields* (Newcomb & Gauss, 1900), 233-234.
- ⁴ “Rich Strike in Koyukuk District,” *Seattle Star*, September 27, 1899, 1; “The Rich Koyukuk,” *Nome News*, December 30, 1899, 3.
- ⁵ “Bound for Koyukuk River,” *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, June 6, 1899, 6.
- ⁶ “The Koyukuk Country,” *Seattle Daily Times*, July 18, 1899, 1.
- ⁷ Donald A. McKenzie, “Two Seasons in the Koyukuk Gold Fields,” *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, April 8, 1900, 26.
- ⁸ “Rich Finds of Gold on the Koyukuk Rival the Klondike and Cape Nome,” *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, December 31, 1899, 36.
- ⁹ Frank C. Schrader, “Preliminary Report on a Reconnaissance along the Chandler [sic] and Koyukuk Rivers, Alaska, in 1899,” (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1900). See also, “Another Alaska District,” *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, February 24, 1900, 7; “The Koyukuk Gold,” *Seattle Daily Times*, May 24, 1900, 8.
- ¹⁰ Donald A. McKenzie, “Two Seasons in the Koyukuk Gold Fields,” *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, April 8, 1900, 26.
- ¹¹ “Another Alaska District,” *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, February 24, 1900, 7; “Rich Finds of Gold on the Koyukuk Rival the Klondike and Cape Nome,” *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, December 31, 1899, 36.
- ¹² Ibid.
- ¹³ “News from Koyukuk Camp,” *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, August 28, 1900, 6.
- ¹⁴ “Boomers Abroad Again,” *Nome Gold Digger*, August 29, 1900, 1.
- ¹⁵ Bernard H. Camden, “Reconnaissance [sic] of the Koyukuk River, Alaska,” in John C. Cantwell, *Operations of the U.S. Revenue Steamer Nunivak on the Yukon River Station, Alaska, 1899-1901* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1902), 240.
- ¹⁶ Ibid., 240-241.
- ¹⁷ Ibid., 241-242.
- ¹⁸ “Steamer for Koyukuk,” *Daily Klondike Nugget*, August 20, 1900, 3.
- ¹⁹ Camden, *Reconnaissance*, 248.
- ²⁰ “A New View of Alaska,” *Times* (Washington, D.C.), August 30, 1899, 3; “Alaska Land Districts,” *Oregonian*, February 6, 1900, 4; “Peavy Land District,” Executive Order, William McKinley, February 14, 1899; “Land Office for Nome,” *Nome News*, March 17, 1900, 4.



Storefront at Old Bettles near the confluence of the Koyukuk and the John River, 2009. Courtesy of the author.

CONCLUSION

No one knows, except those who have tried it, how strenuous the life is, and no one knows, unless it be the man with his pack on his back, the incurable nature of the fever that gets into the prospector's blood.

—Koyukuk miner Chester Snow, 1906

In almost every way the Koyukuk River gold stampede was a flash in the pan. The eager stampeders who arrived on that northerly waterway in 1898 discovered that gold was exceedingly hard to find, and those who survived cold and disease and drowning left within a year feeling more than a little defeated. This story was repeated across Alaska during the gold rush era and, certainly, when it came to filling bank accounts, the Koyukuk River was a bust. Nevertheless, this burst of human activity in Alaska's Far North did produce something marvelous, something that other stampedes did not—high-quality photographs and multiple eye-witness accounts. These rich sources, created by the people who experienced the Koyukuk stampede first hand, offer the historian not just the skeleton of the story (how many people, what route they took, how much gold) but the flesh and blood as well. At least fifteen Koyukuk stampeders left behind written accounts of their experiences in letters, diaries, and published books, and four used cameras to document the drama as it unfolded. In doing so, they allow us an intimate glimpse of the past and their many voices fairly shout across the abyss of time.

As the first line in his 1953 novel *The Go-Betweens*, L.P. Hartley wrote, “The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there,” and historians use this notion to explain why, when examining historical events, we require not just facts and figures but also imagination. If the past is a foreign country, we must strive to understand the language and culture of people in a by-gone era and to imagine ourselves in their shoes. The Koyukuk stampeders who took photographs and put pen to paper, communicate to us, over a century later, what it was they valued most (family, gold, survival) and how they felt as they faced a new life in an unfamiliar and often inhospitable corner of the world. Jasper Wyman's carefully composed photographs and the stampeders' letters and journals allow us to explore that distant land. To be sure, not every account was the same—for some stampeders the Far North was a grand adventure, but for many others, like Charlie Miller who arrived via the Dall River trail, the Koyukuk was “the most Miserable place on earth.”¹ Whatever their experience, we are fortunate that they recorded their thoughts and feelings in ways that survive today.

Gold nugget discovered on Union Gulch near the Koyukuk Middle Fork by Vernon Watts on September 3, 1901. The nugget weighed 35 ounces and 5 pennyweights, or about 35 $\frac{1}{4}$ ounces. University of Alaska Fairbanks, Garrett Busch Photograph Collection (1985-71-55N).



In addition to rich historical source material, the Koyukuk stampede offers another legacy—that of change and adaptation in the years that followed. Although mining activity in the region dipped significantly after 1900, it did not die out, and discoveries, either of a large nugget or of a new creek prospect, kept the Koyukuk River in the news on a regular basis. On September 3, 1901, for example, the miner Vernon Watts found a nugget on a tributary of the Middle Fork called Union Gulch that weighed over thirty-five ounces and covered the palm of his hand. At nineteen dollars per ounce, the nugget was worth nearly \$670. This was just the sort of find that would periodically bring miners rushing in.² However, with each

minor boom there was a bust and few could agree about the Koyukuk's true potential. As a writer for the *Nome News* explained in 1902, the gold was unevenly distributed or "spotted" and the Koyukuk's twin handicaps of distance and lack of supplies were unchanged:

Reports from the Koyukuk as to the richness and extent of recent discoveries are very conflicting. Certain it is that the interior of Alaska will prove a much more expensive camp to live in than the coast cities. Those who intent taking part in the Koyukuk rush will do well to see that their exchequer is well garnered. Walk-



ing is bad, the trail is a long one and steamboat fare costs money.³

Although Nome continued to draw miners away and other gold mining centers emerged like Chena and Fairbanks in 1902 and Caro on the Chandalar River in 1906, a determined cadre refused to abandon the Koyukuk. They continued to mine at Tramway Bar, Florence Bar, and Hughes Bar and found gold on the South Fork at Gold Creek and Gold Bench; on the Middle Fork at Porcupine Creek, Emma Creek, and tributaries of the Hammond River; and on the North Fork at Mascot Creek. As a result, Coldfoot and Bettles thrived as mining camps and supply depots for miners pushing northward.

The emerging Koyukuk gold district expanded in production and reputation again in 1906 when local miners imported steam boilers and thawing equipment to a Middle Fork tributary called Nolan Creek. After managing to dig prospecting shafts

well over one hundred feet deep, miners began finding rich deposits and were soon “washing out” pans containing up to \$1,800. The once lonely valley throbbed with activity and over the next four years the miners at Nolan Creek produced more than \$800,000.⁴ Six miles away, at the mouth of Wiseman Creek, a town sprang up that at first was called Wright City (after Wright’s Roadhouse on the same creek) and then Nolan, but the residents eventually settled on Wiseman.⁵ Wiseman’s fortunes grew because of its proximity to the Nolan diggings and new mines to the north along Hammond River, and by 1911 Wiseman had overtaken Coldfoot as the principal settlement and supply post for the upper Koyukuk gold fields. As was often the case in a land where cabin logs were a valuable commodity, abandoned buildings at Coldfoot were dismantled and reassembled in Wiseman—and this included Coldfoot’s log post office and schoolhouse.

Drift mining camps in the Nolan Creek valley, 1909. U.S. Geological Survey Digital Library, A.G. Maddren (39).



A Koyukuk River scow at Bettles beginning the journey upstream to Coldfoot and Wiseman, ca. 1910. Harry Leonard Collection (123).

The miners who lived in Wiseman and the surrounding area were a hardy bunch accustomed to back-breaking labor and long spells without access to supplies. Those who stayed all year hunted, fished, and gardened to provide themselves with enough food. Others trapped and sold the furs for cash or took jobs on Yukon River steamboats or as freight haulers working scows through the shallow sections between Bettles, Wiseman, and mining camps farther north. Koyukuk miners like Chester Snow, who spoke to *Alaska-Yukon Magazine* in 1906, tried to explain why he chose to live in such a remote place and how his dreams of striking it rich drove him onward. His only complaint, evidently,

was about the need to earn enough cash to continue his search the following year:

Once a prospector, always a prospector—until I strike it. No one knows, except those who have tried it, how strenuous the life is, and no one knows, unless it be the man with his pack on his back, the incurable nature of the fever that gets into the prospector's blood. . . . During the months when I am working for enough money to get supplies so as to return to the wilderness I feel like a prisoner. I chafe under the conditions which compel this interference with my quest.⁶



The quest for gold was not the only factor that brought change to the Koyukuk region in the aftermath of the stampede. The Alaska Native population along the river corridor had declined due largely to measles and other epidemic diseases brought by the outsiders, and those who survived often found their world transformed. Many worked at gold mining operations, aboard steamboats, or at various trading posts, and a cash economy based on imported goods

blended with traditional trade practices and food harvests. In later years, families that before followed wide-ranging seasonal itineraries settled down in a number of new villages. Both Koyukon Athabascans and Inupiaq Eskimos lived among the miners in Bettles and Wiseman, and further south, both groups gathered at St. John's-in-the-Wilderness Episcopal Mission established by Archdeacon Hudson Stuck in 1906. This mission community formed where the

Pupils gather at St. John's-in-the-Wilderness Mission, ca. 1910. The mission founded by Hudson Stuck in 1906 later became the community of Allakaket. Alaska State Library, Amelia Hill Photograph Collection (P247-171).



The Koyukon Athabascan leader Chief Moses wearing a winter parka with a wolverine ruff and marten skin hat, ca. 1910. He was witness to the era of Russian control of Alaska, the arrival of American fur traders, and the Koyukuk River gold stampede. Archives of the Episcopal Church, Austin, Texas.



Miners show visitors a self-dumping bucket excavating gravel on Hammond River, ca. 1920. Harry Leonard Collection (187).

Koyukuk River crossed the Arctic Circle and eventually became known as Allakaket. Directly across the river, the Inupiaq people who had long been neighbors and trading partners to the Koyukon established the village of Alatna. Koyukon Athabascans also settled in the villages of Hughes, Huslia, Koyukuk, Kaltag, Nulato, Galena, Ruby, Tanana, Rampart, and Steven's Village.

In the decades that followed, the residents of the Koyukuk region, both white and Alaska Native, developed ways of life that combined traditional subsistence activities like hunting and fishing with modern innovations. New technologies like the airplane, automobile, snowmobile, outboard motor, and Caterpillar tractor diminished the isolation residents had heretofore experienced. The first airplane to arrive in Wiseman was a bi-plane that landed on a gravel bar in 1925, and soon the town became an important stop for flights to the Arctic coast. Wiseman's first automobile arrived in 1931 and was used for transportation over the rough four-mile road

to the Nolan diggings. And the first diesel tractors, which arrived in the 1930s along the Koyukuk, made it possible to haul heavy loads across rough terrain in both winter and summer. Bettles, which had been losing population for years, was transformed during the 1940s when the U.S. Navy built an airfield roughly seven miles away from the old trading post. The airfield was intended to aid petroleum exploration on the Arctic Slope, and soon the Navy purchased buildings from Bettles and moved them over the snow in winter (using diesel tractors) to the new aviation facility. The community that grew up around the airfield adopted the name Bettles and the former trading post is now a ghost town known locally as Old Bettles.

Even more dramatic change came to the Koyukuk region in the 1970s when huge petroleum deposits were discovered near the Arctic Ocean. A consortium of oil companies rapidly built the trans-Alaska oil pipeline and the 414-mile service road (today called the James W. Dalton Highway), which pass



Vernon Watts (left) and a friend show off a pan full of nuggets at Watts' Hammond River mining operation, ca. 1928. Harry Leonard Collection (518).

within a half-mile of Wiseman and cross the Koyukuk's South Fork on their way north. In 1975 a small spur road opened Wiseman to Alaska's highway system for the first time. Even Coldfoot, abandoned for over sixty years, reemerged during this period as a stop for truckers seeking food, lodging, and fuel along the new road. Today Wiseman has a tiny year-round population, and in summer tourists arrive by plane and car to catch a glimpse of Alaska's early mining history among the old log cabins. Visitors can learn more about the area's natural and cultural history in Coldfoot at the Arctic

Interagency Visitor Center which is jointly managed by the National Park Service, the Bureau of Land Management, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. If people are looking for evidence of gold mining in the area, they will find the bits and pieces of long-abandoned claims as well as active mines at Nolan Creek and at a handful of other locations.

Much about the Koyukuk River gold stampede was ephemeral and visitors to the region today would search long and hard before finding any remnants of the camps where Jasper Wyman and his fellow gold-seekers

spent the winter and where they launched prospecting trips. Still, seeking to understand the lives of the men and women who visited this place over a century ago deepens our appreciation of our shared history. That history is documented today in large part because of national parks and other conservation units created by the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act of 1980, commonly known as ANILCA. These include Gates of the Arctic National Park & Preserve, Kanuti National Wildlife Refuge, Koyukuk National

Wildlife Refuge, and Yukon Flats National Wildlife Refuge. As outlined in ANILCA, these protected places are mandated to preserve “for the benefit, use, education and inspiration of present and future generations certain lands and waters . . . [with] nationally significant natural, scenic, historic, archeological, geological, scientific, wilderness, cultural, recreational, and wildlife values.” This examination of the brief but dramatic Arctic odyssey in pursuit of gold is but one chapter in the long, rich history of this diverse region.

ENDNOTES

¹ Thomas W. Moore, undated typescript at British Columbia Provincial Archives, Victoria, British Columbia, in William E. Brown, *Gaunt Beauty, Tenuous Life: Historic Resources Study* (Anchorage: National Park Service, 1988), 177.

² “It Weighs 25 Ozs. 5 Dwts.,” *Nome News*, February 18, 1902, 1; “Another Big Nugget,” *Nome News*, April 25, 1902, 1; “Pure Gold,” *Nome Nugget*, August 5, 1903, 1; “Almost Pure Gold,” *Nome Nugget*, October 10, 1903, 1.

³ “Want No Stampede,” *Nome Nugget*, May 7, 1902, 1; “Koyukuk a Frost,” *Nome Semi-Weekly News*, June 10, 1902, 2; “Koyukuk a Frost,” *Nome News*, June 13, 1902, 1; “Blackens Koyukuk,” *Nome News*, July 27, 1902, 1.

⁴ “Koyukuk Has Good Outlook,” *Fairbanks Daily Times*, June 12, 1906, 1; “Nolan Creek Find,” *Hot Springs Echo*, December 30, 1907, 1; “Koyukuk Pans Out Gold Running \$1800 to the Pan,” *Los Angeles Herald*, March 30, 1908, 12; “Bishop In Gold Rush; Pans \$500,” *Los Angeles Herald*, April 27, 1908, 1; “Koyukuk Miner’s Story of Wealth,” *Fairbanks Daily Times*, July 30, 1908, 1.

⁵ The origins of “Wiseman” as the town’s name are not well known beyond that it was named for Wiseman Creek, and it is thought that a gold-seeker named the creek around 1898. Robert Marshall in *Arctic Village* (1933) wrote that the name commemorates “a transient prospector who stopped a few minutes to pan its gravels and perpetuate his own name.” On August 6, 1898 the *San Francisco Call* reported that “O. Wiseman and James Hastings started for the Koyukuk,” but nothing more is known about this person.

⁶ “Type of Alaskan Prospector,” *Alaska-Yukon Magazine* (March 1908), 58.

⁷ Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act, Title I, Purposes.



On the beach at St. Michael, Stuart Forbes of Illinois reads his first letter from home, July 4, 1898. Anchorage Museum, Jasper N. Wyman Collection (B1989.24.37).

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- San Francisco Call*
- Times* (Washington, DC)
- Washington Post*
- Yukon Midnight Sun* (Dawson, YT)
- Yukon Press* (Ft. Adams, AK)

APPENDIX A

MEMBERS OF THE GALESBURG-ALASKA MINING & DEVELOPING COMPANY

President: Norman K. Aldrich

Vice-president: Simon Weinberg, Jr.

Secretary: Claus Rodine

Treasurer: Arthur E. Anderson

1. Norman K. Aldrich, Architect, Galesburg, Illinois
2. Fred K. Allen, Geologist, Ottawa, Illinois
3. Arthur E. Anderson, Banker, Galesburg, Illinois
4. Edward R. Berguson, Farmer, Lynn Center, Illinois
5. F.G. Burt, Cook, Galesburg, Illinois
6. Stuart Forbes, Student, Champlain, Illinois
7. J.N. Gault, Carpenter, Moline, Illinois
8. Allen Gustafson, Farmer, New Windsor, Illinois
9. H.L. Hall, Farmer, Bowen, Illinois
10. John M. Hewitt, Doctor, Galesburg, Illinois
11. Elmer Hoagner, Farmer, New Windsor, Illinois
12. Eli F. Juda, Farmer, Golden, Illinois
13. Thomas Land, Housemover, Galesburg, Illinois
14. George V. Mespaly, Engineer & Electrician, Galesburg, Illinois
15. William Olsen, Machinist, Galesburg, Illinois
16. William M. Pendergrass, Housemover, Galesburg, Illinois
17. Claus Rodine, Real Estate & Loan, Galesburg, Illinois
18. S.S. Soper, Barber, Wataga, Illinois
19. William H. Van Scoy, Butcher, Altona, Illinois
20. A.N. Vineberg, Blacksmith, Opheim, Illinois
21. Frederick M. Wall, Boat Pilot, Moline, Illinois
22. Simon Weinberg, Jr., Cold Storage, Galesburg, Illinois
23. Orville D. White, Assayer, Camp Point, Illinois
24. Henry Winchester, Schoolteacher, Elmore, Illinois
25. Jasper N. Wyman, Rancher & Photographer, Appleton, Illinois

APPENDIX B

STEAMBOATS INVOLVED IN THE KOYUKUK STAMPEDE

This list includes vessels known to have carried stampedeers to the Koyukuk River and to have passed the winter of 1898-1899 frozen in place. These were flat-bottomed river steamboats (often called “steamers”) with paddlewheels at the rear.

Ship Name	Company/Owner	Company/Owner Home	Length
<i>Alaska Union</i>	Alaska Union Mining Co.	Chicago, IL	110 feet
<i>Alpha</i>	Arthur R. Auston	Seattle, WA	38 feet
<i>Anawanda</i>	Anawanda Mining & Milling Co.	New York, NY	46 feet
<i>Argo</i>	Cleveland-Alaska Gold Mining & Milling Company	Cleveland, OH	60 feet
<i>Argonaut</i>	Alaska Exploration Company	San Francisco, CA	50 feet
<i>Aurora</i>	Owned by Eugene A. Mantell	San Francisco, CA	63 feet
<i>Aurum</i>	.....	.....	.....
<i>Beaver</i>	Owned by Harry A. Parshall	Beaver Falls, PA	55 feet
<i>Blackfoot</i>	.....	.....	.....
<i>City of Paris</i>	Paris-Alaska Mining Company	Paris, MI	120 feet
<i>Concord</i>	Owned by Henry C. Lassen	Alameda, CA	46 feet
<i>D. Armstrong</i>	St. Mary's Mining & Milling Company	St. Mary's, OH	56 feet
<i>Dorothy</i>	Koyukuk Mining & Exploration Company	Boston, MA	75 feet
<i>Eclipse</i>	Gloucester Mining Company	Gloucester, MA	50 feet
<i>Edith M. Kyle</i>	Owned by George Kyle	Boston, MA	62 feet
<i>Elmore</i>	.....	.....	.....
<i>Emily M.</i>	.....	.....	32 feet

<i>Florence</i>	Alaska Commercial Company	San Francisco, CA	101 feet
<i>Fulton</i>	.....	.....	65 feet
<i>Gold Hunter</i>	.....	.....	.....
<i>Hettie B.</i>	Alaska-Yukon Transportation Company	.....	43 feet
<i>Illinois</i>	Galesburg-Alaska Mining & Developing Company	Galesburg, IL	75 feet
<i>Iowa</i>	Iowa-Alaska Mining Company	.....	60 feet
<i>James Deitrick</i>	Owned by James Deitrick	Elizabeth, NJ	50 feet
<i>Jennie M.</i>	Philadelphia Exploration & Mining Company	Philadelphia, PA	70 feet
<i>Joe Matthews</i>	Cascade Development Company	Seattle, WA	46 feet
<i>Katie Hemrich</i>	Yukon Gold Dredge Company	.....	.....
<i>Lavelle Young</i>	Owned by Columbia River Pilots Association	Portland, OR	140 feet
<i>Leota</i>	Alameda & Alaska Mining & Trading Company	Alameda, CA	51 feet
<i>Little Jim</i>	Iowa-Alaska Mining Company	.....	.....
<i>Lone Star</i>	.....	.....	.....
<i>Los Angeles</i>	.....	.....	48 feet
<i>Luella</i>	Owned by Charles M. Hamilton	Chicago, IL	65 feet
<i>Mabel C.</i>	.....	.....	58 feet
<i>Marietta</i>	.....	.....	.....
<i>Marjorie</i>	.....	.....	37 feet
<i>Martha Clow</i>	Owned by Charles R. Clow	Chicago, IL	65 feet
<i>Messenger</i>	Yukon Gold Dredge Company	.....	.....
<i>Minneapolis</i>	Minneapolis & Alaska Developing Company	Minneapolis, MN	109 feet
<i>Niagra</i>	Owned by John F. Walker	Vancouver, BC	40 feet
<i>North Star</i>	North Star Mining Company	.....	46 feet
<i>Redlands</i>	Redlands-Alaska Mining Company	Redlands, CA	50 feet

ARCTIC ODYSSEY: A HISTORY OF THE KOYUKUK RIVER GOLD STAMPEDE IN ALASKA'S FAR NORTH			
<i>Research</i>	Klondyke Research Syndicate	Liverpool, England	60 feet
<i>Senator W. B. Allison</i>	.....	.....	50 feet
<i>Sirene</i>	.....	.....	....
<i>Sovereign</i>	Columbia Navigation Company	.....	126 feet
<i>St. James</i>	.....	St. James, MN	70 feet
<i>Sunflower</i>	Sunflower Mining Company	Fort Scott, KS	60 feet
<i>Unity</i>	.....	.....	....
<i>W. Seig</i>	.....	.....	....
<i>Weona</i>	.....	.....	40 feet
<i>Wilbur Crimmin</i>	Owned by John D. Crimmin, Jr.	Coupeville, WA	80 feet
<i>William McKinley</i>	.....	.....	....
<i>Wintbrop</i>	.....	.....	....
<i>Yukon</i>	Alaska Commercial Company	San Francisco, CA	70 feet

**STEAMBOATS THAT SPENT THE WINTER OF 1898-1899 AT DALL RIVER AND SENT
STAMPEDERS OVERLAND TO THE KOYUKUK**

Ship Name	Company/Owner	Company/Owner Home	Length
<i>El Sueño de Oro</i>	El Sueño de Oro Mining & Transportation Company	San Francisco, CA	44 feet
<i>Mary F. Graff</i>	Blue Star Navigation Company	Seattle, WA	177 feet
<i>Monarch</i>	Columbia Navigation Company	Ballard, WA	150 feet
<i>Reindeer</i>	Yukon & Hootalinqua Navigation Company	Victoria, BC	121 feet
<i>Rideout</i>	California-Yukon Trading Company	San Francisco, CA	149 feet
<i>St. Michael</i>	Owned by Captain William H. Geiger,	.....	49 feet
<i>William H. Evans</i>	Lewis-Klondike Expedition Company	Baltimore, MD	183 feet



Prospects look discouraging as there has been nothing more discovered than we found on our first arrival . . . The people here are all talking over their trip telling each other why and how they came here and are now planning and wondering how they will manage to get out . . . it has already become a general by-word 'I guess we will have to go out with the ice.'

—Jasper N. Wyman, January 1, 1899